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Reaching for Insights
Stories of Love, Faith and the Kitchen Sink
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Dedication

To the moments and those that help make them. Alyssa, Evan, Dave, Russ, and all of the Rosenzweig's: you have helped fill my heart with wisdom and soul with grace. And Mom, it is you who still inspires me each and every day. I miss you and love you. Forever and always.

Introduction

Writing this second book was much more challenging than the first. The first nearly wrote itself as the words poured onto the page like spilled milk; messy goodness. But for this one it was much more a refinement process. More like spilled wine: better words, but much more costly emotionally. Although we shouldn't cry over spilled milk, many of these words did make me cry—as well as touch the rest of the range of emotions. Insight continues to flood my thoughts and through my fingers as the essays have continued to flow. The more pasteurized ones made the cream and have been included. But for many, they had to mature like fine wine to reach perfection.

But perfection is not what this book is about. It is about finding lessons in our daily lives. So often we look for the big aha! moment, only to have it fade quickly into one more notch or milestone. Although an anticipatory pleasure to behold while full, an empty wine bottle serves little purpose but to remind us of what was. Yet life should never be a "was." Life should be a "now:" full, rich, and savored by the vintner and milk maid alike. Each now moment is both a gift and an inspiration for the one that follows. Building on life's lessons small and large, are what make for an exceptional connoisseur of life.

In each moment, of every day, we can learn, grow, and become better versions of ourselves. Although the moments may be perceived only as grapes, distilled together they form the stuff of great pleasure. It seems that my first book, *Insights from the Ordinary,* produced that for some readers. From teens to seniors, I received comments on how the book seemed to have been written "just for them." And it was, for although writers write to express

themselves, it is equally true that what is written is always intended to be offered as a shared experience.

The stories here are much more personal than the previous lighthearted tome. Somehow they seemed to have reached deeper into my psyche and pulled from the center core of the barrel. Richer, fuller and more settled, yet still of the same vineyard.

So fill a glass with milk—or wine if you prefer—and savor the moments. Each sip is as good, if not better, than the last. Curl up and reach for insights into what is, and what can be, when you become more aware of your faith, love, and even the kitchen sink.

Table of Contents

Faith

Footprints	3
Perfectly imperfect	5
More than presence	6
Give it up	8
Breathing lessons	10
Just a brick	12
Indelible	14
Everyday thanks	15
Shine upon you	17
Coming of age	19
Don't forget	21
Just one more thing	23
The great secret	25
References	27
Not just dinner	29
Updates	31
Strong foundation	32
Eve	34
Our house	35
Gusts	36
The right mix	37
The daily grind	39
The key	41
Lighten up	43

Yep, it works! 44
No extension required 46
There is an answer 47
A simple prayer 49
Turn the page 51
Die broke 53

Love

Ever after 57
Known parts 59
Buy one, get one 60
Today is the day 62
Loopy 64
Not so hot 66
Extremes 68
Do the do 70
For sure today 72
Told ya so 74
Forget just I 76
Moments 78
Forget black friday 80
Extra helping 82
Alert 84
Trash picking 86
Just a day 88
The best policy 90
Take comfort 92
Upside down 93
Just one more day 95
Twinkle 96
Back 97
Not everybody but somebody 98
Unchained again 100

Sprinkle a little 102
The zone 104
As fresh as a minute 105
Cleansing 107
Always and forever 109
The short list 110
Abracadabra 112
Burn clean 113
Say it again 115
Zoom 117
New canvas 119
Wizard 121
The promise 122
Every night, every light 123
Love snacks 125
Not forgotten 126
Well spent 128
Mugging 129
Better to be exposed 131

Awareness

Being azure 135
The hour 136
Given not earned 138
Under the cypress tree 140
Round 'em up 142
Pokey 144
Parts is parts 146
In your lane 148
Back it up 150
Fly away 152
The cure 154
Make a wish 156

Just git 158
Sync-up 160
86,400 163
Small cuts 165
Counting change 167
Drop the ball 169
Just 171
Traction 172
Doubts 173
Undone 174
Pretzel logic 176
Designing 178
Slow burn 179
Patches 180
Drawn right 181
Consistent to the core 182
She's coming! 183
Oh fudge 184
Clean it up 187
The right stuff 188
Hold it up 189
Oh mom 190
Simple strength 191
Toddler lessons 192
Get carded 194
Just enough stuff 196
Your flag is still there 198
The flow 200
Power up 202
Disco lives 204
How now 206
When it is 208
Cracked up 209
Defying silence 210

Indecision 211
Getting better 213
Check-in 214

Kitchen Sink

Now you have everything 219
The quest 221
Forget the map 222
Yay! Everyday 224
Three 225
Hinged 226
Tangled 228
Superman and Elvis did too 230
That time 232
Real is better 233
Between the toes 235
It's in there 237
More than wine 239
Just a dash 241
Vroom 242
Flicker 244
Intermittent 245
Welcome back 247
Red carpet 249
Simple math 251
meDevice 253
The scoop 255
Bundle up 257
Salt and pepper 259
Leave room 260
Always one more 261
Jump up 262
Zoom in 263

Misaligned 265
Another notch 266
Crummy 267
The box 269
Sniff 270
Guide 272
Scribbles 274
Block 275
Always another 277
Wagging is better 279
Find the sidewalk 281
Slow is better 282
Clean it off 283
Infomercial 284
Tune in 286
Piled high 287
Be the light 289
Not quite 291
Between 292
Initialize 293
Holding up 295
Temperature 296
Always right 298
Never cured 300
Another perfect 301
Perfectly imperfect 302
The flow 303
No outlet 305
The other two too 307
Wash up 309
No miracles required 310
Unsettled 311
Not always right 312
Swirl 314

More happy 315
No crystal ball required 317
A Good Tip 319
Just another hill 321
Somewhere around here 323
In and out 325
Down is good 326
By the numbers 328

Faith

Footprints

Down the long and dusty road there were obvious tire tracks. I suspect when it rained, it was the only way to get to the mountainous sand dunes. The parking area was full of footprints of people scrambling with the gear to get to the trailhead. Lot of crushed, smeary prints made by people in a hurry. It was a little difficult to get your footing on the loose gravel. As the terrain changed to rocky rubble the footing was even more unsure. Ankles waiting to be twisted, if you ask me. But as it changed to smoother coarse sand, the footprints became fewer. There were still quite a few, though they seemed to be all over the place. You could clearly see the prints of couples side by side in stride. A few smaller sprinkled prints of children. Even a few in the "protected area." As the vegetation thinned out, the mountain turned to fine dune sand. It was much harder walking—my shoes were full of sand. The footprints were not so obvious any more; they were more like obscure indents. As the footprints of man disappeared, the delicate ones of nature became apparent. It looked like a coyote had been chasing desert mice, as there were lots of those prints. I couldn't figure out the swirly ones until I saw a rattler wind across the trail in the distance. Tiny little lizard prints were everywhere, and more than a few tiny lizards too. Near the top of the dune the sand seemed virtually untouched. The sand was deep there and hard to walk in. In the noon, nothing was moving at all. The sun was glorious.

We tread many paths on our life's journey. At first the journey is more like "get in the car; we are going," as our parents drive us to our first stop. The trailhead is confusing and full of missteps. It is clear that everyone has gone this way, as there are prints everywhere. As our paths become more individual, our terrain changes. We begin to define who we are and where we

are going. Together or separate, our steps match with those that travel on our journey. At some point, the dangers become clear and fewer travel our way. But it is here where we can see the beauty of the path. In the heat near the top, it is our prints alone that still stand.

Although we all must travel the terrain of life, our paths are our own. Each part of our journey requires different skills. From the careful footing of the rocky, to the tedious steps in the deep sand, we must find a way to reach our apex. But with each step we get closer to where we want to be. And at the end, we stand alone in our accomplishments.

The Son lights our way as we try to reach our goals. From the hard to the easy our steps can be shady or bright. But if we watch our footing we will make it. Nature's beauty surrounds our journey if we take the time to look. And when we get to the top, He shines brightest of all in our accomplishments.

Find the path that is right for you. Keep moving to the top of your potential. With love and faith, your journey will end up in glory.

Perfectly imperfect

I think I must be flawed. I know God doesn't make mistakes but perhaps he was distracted when he was thinking me up. Maybe he figured, "What the heck, let's see how this one turns out." I mean you have to wonder, if God is pure love, the essence of everything, surely he can make perfect. But when I look around, and look inside, I know that neither I nor anyone else is perfect. And at the risk of being struck by lightning, Jesus wasn't perfect either. He also had some of the failings of mankind. Perhaps that's why we don't know much about Him as a child. He must have been less than a perfect child. I think part of his becoming man was to help God understand what it was like to be human. He could have obviously just appeared in all of his majesty and the whole world would have believed. But that wasn't what He chose. Makes you wonder why.

But perhaps this is why *we* are not perfect. We know from the New Testament that Christ spent time in prayer about his human frailties. He was fearful of dying, of the burdens that had been placed upon him. He asked his dad to pick someone else. *Why me*, he wanted to know.

So if we accept that Jesus wasn't perfect, and perhaps could have been, then why do we set our goals on what was even impossible to Him? Does this mean we want to be better than Jesus? My faith says that we can strive to be god-like but we aren't gods. Seems to be a big contradiction.

God doesn't expect perfection. Although we should strive for being the best we can be, it is only our best that is expected. Nothing more and nothing less. Those expectations will never change, even when you make mistakes. Mistakes are expected and required. Imperfect may in fact be perfect.

More than presence

We were 20 deep at the register and the cashier was nowhere in sight. Apparently she needed the manager for some sort of void transaction. The shoppers were all impatient, I am sure with a million things to do since it was late Christmas Eve. Nervously they shuffled and grumbled, the line condensing with everyone moving a little closer as if that would help them get to the promised land of checkout.

Behind me was an older woman, wearing a very outdated pillbox fur hat. Her clothes were equally outdated and perhaps a little shabby. She kept shuffling through her hand basket, counting and pondering her prospective purchases. I tried to strike up a conversation and she was a bit wary, wizened to the dangers of strangers. She said she was trying to make simple costumes for her grandkids for a homespun Christmas pageant, a tradition at her house for the grands and great-grands. She fingered the headbands, trying to figure out how to make halos. You could see her mind working. She clutched an old-fashioned coin purse, with one of those butterfly enclosures, just brimming with nickels and dimes. You could tell that she was watching her pennies as she carefully contemplated each dollar store purchase. She put some glitter back and recounted, finally sure of what she would buy. There couldn't have been more than ten or so items left. We really only exchanged but a few sentences as the line finally started to move. She was again lost in thought, perhaps of Christmas's past, as I finally reached the register with my wrapping paper.

Christmas is a time of giving. We all think about the latest gadgets, jewels and must-haves. I remember a Christmas many years ago where we had presents piled almost as high as the tree. In spite of the lamented commercialism

and obligations, in our hearts we want to show those we care about them. There is nothing better than watching someone surprise opening the perfect, thoughtful gift.

We have our traditions and rituals that are required, from the food we serve, to this woman's homespun Christmas story. Sometimes it's hard and we are far from those we care about or can't make ends meet. But we still strive to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our own way.

I handed the cashier a 20 to take care of my paper. I whispered to her, "Take care of that," nodding quietly toward the woman behind me, and quickly disappeared out the door. The woman will never know my name, but for me, it made my day and Christmas.

To each of you reading, I wish you peace, love and prosperity for the coming year. Keep Christ's presence alive in your heart the other 364 days and you will know the true meaning of Christmas.

Give it up

They were three of them, just wasting time before their appointments. They had just come back from combat downrange and the unit had had some causalities. They were young and barely had any rank. Good-natured and happy, one soldier was ribbing the other about his weight. He said, "You're pretty good at this 'weighting' thing..." It was stupid but it made me smile—my kind of humor. Clearly, it was annoying him. It wasn't real bad but you could just tell. The third chided the other guy and said, "Stop trying to get his goat..." Since there were no small, furry creatures with horns around, I suspect his goat was safe. I joined the chat indicating that this was just AWT, official Army Waiting Training. Finally the guy said, "Just give it up, it doesn't bother me."

Today marks the first day of Lent, where Christians all over the world remember Christ's cleansing trip to the desert before his death. In recognition, we are supposed to mimic his sacrifice by giving up something pleasurable. For years I have keep this part of my faith alive, not only because of my beliefs, but because there is always a list of vices to get rid of. Once again, I give up cigars. I have done this for three successive Lents only to start again after Easter.

These young men have signed on to make sacrifices. Many with the thoughts of adventure, only to be met with the realities of war. Today, I learned about the men in their platoon that made the ultimate sacrifice in an IED explosion. Although they sign up to protect our freedom, most of them are just chasing the American dream. They don't sign up to die for you or me, they sign up to live. But if dying is asked for, they lay down their lives for us.

When we think about sacrifice, most of us don't do it well. We talk about how hard it is to give up something trifling, like candy or cigars. One woman I work with was bemoaning giving up coffee. Of course, many of us make personal sacrifices for our children, to offer them a better way of life than perhaps we had. But our servicemen sign on to help all of us to maintain our personal freedoms. Even though they will never meet you or get anything personal out of it. Rather, the exact opposite is true. Battered and banged up, they just wear out before their time with physical and emotional injuries. I met with this soldier who was 30 yesterday; he looked more than 50 with a long list of combat-related challenges.

I join with those of you that chose to make sacrifices for the next 40 days. But I also join in thanking our servicemen and women for their sacrifices. Without their sacrifice, I might not even have the freedom of faith. Lent can also be a time when we remember the sacrifices made first by the Son to bring us closer to his Father, and now each day by these brave men and woman who sacrifice so much. Today I give it up in applause and prayer for them for helping me to be free.

Breathing lessons

Now I have four different kinds of medication, all in little vials. Three of them contain the same medication and the other one is different. One batch is very old, expired like 5 years ago. I am not sure they work so well. The other one, which I have less of, seems to help the most while the other two seem pretty good. But I have been using them for the past two months to help me breathe. I just squeeze in to the machine and it produces magic vapor.

I haven't been breathing well for weeks. It's either something in the air or just my body wearing out. It seems to go in cycles, especially at this time of the year. Sometimes I am totally fine and other times, like last night, I wake up coughing a lung out. I thought my head and heart were going to explode too. It was really bad in Seattle and has gotten a little better since I got back to New Hampshire. Seems I am always sucking on the darn nebulizer now: I hope I get better soon. The last time I went to the Doc's, they said I need to take medication all year round. Maybe I need a lungectomy.

The circle of life produces many changes in us. When we are young we are hyperactive with drive and energy. Even if we get a bit winded, it's OK as we can pause and catch our breath. But as we get older, things change. We are supposed to get smarter, richer, happier, and be able to breathe better. And for some that works well. But young or old, it's been a challenge for me to just pause and breathe.

I think that life too has little ampules that help when you're struggling. Breathing in kindness and friendship helps things get a little better. A pause

with a friend, a smile from a stranger, all help you to catch your breath. But at the end of the day, you really need the steady breath of love and faith to help you keep breathing.

And for that, you don't need a prescription.

Just a brick

I could tell there are hundreds of them without even looking. Some of them showed their age and others looked new; well, as new as you can look for being as old as they were. Some of the bricks were still deep red, while others were more pink and brown. Maybe every 20th one was dark as if it had been burned. The wall had been patched several times; it's hard to say what some of the holes were from. They weren't really going for aesthetics when they replaced the bricks, just trying to plug up some hole. But they still seemed strong enough. If you look close, there are remnants of all sorts of fasteners, nails, and hooks that had been useful in their previous industrial mill life. Like rusted scabs, they remain among the stains, dripping a touch of rust here and there. But now the bricks frame my view out over the river and all the colors of the fall. The trees are spectacular in their umbers, reds and golds. In spite of its patches, the brick walls in my apartment give both a sense of character and stability to the frame. It is what gives my place its charm.

Our lives are made of many bricks and we serve as the mason. We carefully build our foundations from our experiences. When we are young, we are fresh and fired strong. Our walls are small and it is easy to just go over and around them. But with each passing year the bricks of character begin to rise. Life's rewards and challenges each add to our strength. There are times that our wall is broken and patched, but we emerge just as strong as before, though maybe not as pretty. We are left with scars of things that no longer have a purpose in our world, but remain embedded with rusty tears.

Our character is what frames our view. We all have flaws if we look close, but it is how we build on them that make us who we are. We can collapse in

a pile of rubble or keep building and re-purposing ourselves. The old mill I live in was an abandoned derelict before it was repaired. Now it is a new old home, where I, and others before and after me, will store their dreams.

As you look at the challenges you face don't focus on the brick or the scars. A single brick is only part of what makes us strong. If there is a weakness, try to patch it up and move on. It may not be perfect, but it will add to your character. A shiny new wall is far less interesting than the weathered and aged.

Our strength comes from our experiences and faith. If you can keep your perspective, you are far stronger than you think. And in the autumn of your life, you can plainly see the beauty that God offers. It is there we will find our enduring strength.

Indelible

Every one of them is still there. Vivid but fading, the ink as bold as the day it was penned. But the paper is golden from age. Worn creases and soft ridges from being grasped over and over. Traces from every hand that has touched it are embedded forever in its essence. Slight tears threaten with each countless glance; its former sharp edges now no longer able to cut. The wizened eye still studies the images, lost in the treasured memories. And in another moment, they are gone. Carefully refolded, preserving all that remains. A box of faded sepia memories.

Memories tear at our minds when we look to our past. Faded images of the exceptional, the ugly, and all in between are captured in the folds of our mind. In our melancholy we fold and refold, glancing at the faded images within. If only we hadn't... or why did we... regrets haunt us in downhearted darkness. For some we will never know the whys; we only remember the emotions that were written in indelible ink on our hearts and souls. The edges may be softer but they still have the power to bring tears.

Moments, days, and decades all hold their own beauty, whether happy or sad. If we cherish the happy, we have to experience the sad to know just how sweet happiness is. Each helps us learn, grow, and change: each is part of our character.

As each day unfolds, carefully look to your past. Treasure and hold safe what you find. But with equal care refold and put away what is done. There is no future in the past. Forgive your faults and use a new lens. The new lens captures much more than the old. If you wipe your tears and frame your thoughts there will be new moments to capture. The new dawn awaits your new indelible memories.

Everyday thanks

I think we should cancel Thanksgiving. It really doesn't fit with any of our other national holidays. Sure, it was hard crossing the ocean in itty-bitty boats; I get it. The Pilgrims were a rugged bunch, refugees really, seeking religious freedom. But every day hundreds arrive on our shores, still seeking the same thing. Trying to escape oppression from where they had lived to freedom in the land of the free. So why should we celebrate the first bunch? Just because they had funny hats? Why not the Rodriguez's, or the Bakers or the Bailys that arrived here just yesterday? Perhaps a National monument at Al's Garage rather than Plymouth Rock?

No question, the early settlers had it hard. Many died over the winters and the expedition was in serious trouble. There is even some evidence of cannibalism in Jamestown… survival of the fittest rearing its ugly head. We take pride that in a show of American hospitality we even invited the Native Americans to our first party. Actually, without the Native American's lessons, food, and farming techniques, we might not have made it through that first year. But history shows a trail of exploitation of the indigenous peoples. Truth be told, the Pilgrims were probably arrogant, racist bigots. Thanksgiving is a day of mourning for the Native Americans.

Now don't get me wrong; I like Thanksgiving, or at least the traditions of it. Gathering family around a buffet of the summer harvest. Collapsed in bloated Turkey comas with those that you love, sitting around the TV watching the Detroit Lions. Perfect. I love being with family and friends. The more the merrier.

So what's my problem? It's simple. We should be thankful every day of the

year, not just on some artificial holiday. Give thanks every day for what you have. Work hard for what you want, and celebrate your successes with the help of your family and friends. Express your faith in God and a positive, hopeful future. We all have hardships in our life, but we also have a heritage, known and unknown, that has built the foundations for the many blessings we take for granted today. We actually can harvest a cornucopia of blessings every day. For all of this and more, I give thanks.

Shine upon you

It's been a long week and I finally have collapsed into my only day off. And of course, it's really not a day off, but one I just don't get paid for. The list of "Gottas" is huge. Not to mention the "Shoulds." My pen ran out of ink as I made the list. At this point I anticipate 3.7 seconds to do absolutely nothing right around 8:14 p.m. I think I won't even get to look at the "Wannas" today. Life is full, and sadly, sometimes it's full of stuff that just needs to get done. For me, it's only me, so if I don't do it, it done ain't gonna get done.

But as I reflect on the approaching avalanche, my thoughts drift to those who collapsed into my office this week. Hour after hour of trauma, tragedy, and tears. Although you have to make mental boundaries, if you are any good as a therapist you have to be empathetic. To be able to walk side-by-side with those seeking help, to help them feel joy where there was sadness. To help let go of their anger, hate, and self-criticism. To gently but firmly guide them to move from the "I cant's," to the "I cans." To refocus on what can be, not what was. Our past will always be there. Whether it was full of mistakes, joys, or unfulfilled potential, it is still past. And not a moment of the present can change one second of it. Except in our relationship to it.

And as I search for the right words to help, my mind is flooded with gratitude. My to-do list is way shorter than my list of blessings. And yet, I feel that I am blessed to be able to help those that need to come back into the light of happiness. My crystal ball doesn't usually work so well but in one thing it is always right: we can all find that which makes us happy.

My earworm for the week has echoed in my prayers for those that need. The song and music come from Satnam Kaur, called "Long Time Sun." May they find peace with where they are and be able to look to a brighter future.

Namaste.

May the Long Time Sun
Shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you
Guide your way on
Guide your way on

Coming of age

Remember when you were young? I know, it's getting harder and harder all the time to access those dusty neurons. But now and then something will trigger that pathway and like a floodgate, the memories pour down the river. I smiled the other day listening to a too-excited kid pointing to everything he wanted for his birthday. His mom gently reminded him it was Christmas. He was too excited all over again. I remember talking to a little kid once who was so excited about what he was going to be for Halloween, except it was March.

Aside from doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief, what did you want to be when you grew up? I am sure the answers are as varied as the years you have accumulated now. When we were in first grade, we all had dreams of glamorous careers, fabulous spouses, and untold wealth. But as the years passed into adolescence, I think the answer became universal for everyone. We all just wanted to be older. Old enough to drive, make our own decisions, and even have a beer. We didn't want anyone to tell us what to do; we already knew everything. Well that is, until we didn't. At some point, some decisions rocked your confidence and you got stupid all of a sudden. Although it seems that some never recovered from their stupid, the rest of us came of age. How grand it was! We passed that milestone and were racing down that path to happily ever after!

At some point, our race to happiness begins to slow. The dreams we passed along the way are now dusty milestones of the past. Good, bad, or indifferent, our old wishes are nothing more than burned-out birthday candles. Gone are the simple dreams for a new toy or costume: that age of majority has come and gone. Now we all wish to be anything but older. Content or not, we no longer anticipate the turn of our birthday.

As we enter the shopping frenzy for Christmas we relive our past wishes. We dream of Norman Rockwell and sleigh rides as we stand ten-deep at the Walmart checkout crush. We eagerly seek the perfect gift, and the loving hug and the gratitude we receive from giving. Although rekindled, the magic of our childhood may never burn as bright. As I anticipate the burden of all of those point and clicks on tomorrow's Cyber Monday, I wonder how Rockwell would paint this scene. Perhaps the UPS truck can be a sleigh?

As I write, the snow is falling outside my window. And in its warming blanket I realize that I once again anticipate coming of age. No, not the trivialities of commercial or material wants, but an age where my head and heart are reminded of what the season is about. Beyond Rockwell, beyond Walmart, there is a wish. It is a universal wish that I know I share with everyone. And it is just as simple as it was when I was a tot.

My wish is for joy and peace for those without. That they receive presents of love and happiness. And for myself, I too have simple wishes. To grow in faith through gratitude, grace, and forgiveness. To be more loving than I was yesterday, to help those that need help, and to keep Christmas in my heart all year long.

With each passing day, I come of age to a new dawn of potential. And I still anticipate birthdays! Today is the day that I will celebrate the birth of our savior. Tomorrow and every day thereafter too. That is the reason for the season.

Don't forget

It seems he's everywhere, although he really isn't. Many people only notice him more when it gets closer to the end, but he's still around the rest of the time. But really, with just a few changes, I am sure we wouldn't recognize him at all. In fact, we aren't even sure what race he is—maybe he is best classified as "other"—check that box. Like most people in cold, rural areas, he has a weight problem, and might even be an alcoholic. He rarely leaves the house: it might be agoraphobia, or just that he doesn't have a car. From what I hear, most of the time he is delusional. He sees little people and has auditory, command hallucinations. The voices tell him to do all sorts of things. He hasn't seen the business end of a razor in years. I think PETA is after him as he is fond of animal skins and fur. When he tries to dress up he looks kind of silly. Not a fashion icon or trendsetter; in a different time he surely would be arrested. Really, he needs an intervention. But I think his heart is good and he loves too much.

Whether more myth or fact, we all seem to love Santa Claus. The mere mention of his name brings visions of sugarplum fairies, presents, and holiday cheer. His image is everywhere, from the commercial mall kind, to the simple drawing of children. What would the season be without Santa? If we tried to take him out of Christmas, it just wouldn't be the same.

Still, he really isn't a terrific role model. He's definitely agoraphobic, overweight, and can't even drive. Perhaps his red nose comes from an eggnog addiction. Red Fur, really? Even Lady Gaga isn't even that bold. Let's not forget the little people—I think he needs Abilify.

So you say stop, don't make fun of Santa! Aren't you afraid of getting coal?

But how can we idolize such a myth? Kris Kringle and Saint Nicolas are immortalized. As children we are mortified when we learn the big lie—that there is no such thing as Santa. Say it ain't so! But in spite of that spoiler we still want to believe. What would Christmas be without Santa Claus?

But what would Christmas be without Christ? Oh wait, Christmas *is* about Christ. He had none of the failings of St. Nick, or mysterious little people. We do have lists for him in our daily prayers, but he doesn't have a magic sleigh to fulfill our wishes. He too asks us to be good boys and girls and love one another. He can travel to our hearts and homes with just a thought. But somehow, many of us only think of him a few times a year. Even many church-going Christians only think of him on Sundays. Christ's presents are more everlasting than a candy cane but we seem to forget Him most of the year.

Every year we have to be reminded of the reason for the season. The details of Christ's teachings are in our stories but each year we fail to remember that the simple magic of Christmas isn't about fat agoraphobics, it's about love. Expressing yours for your family and friends, and most of all for the One for whom the season is all about.

You can believe in Santa but remember to love Christ.

Just one more thing

It can't be Christmas Eve! I'm not ready! I still have presents to buy! Oh my God, I thought I had a few more days. Did the Christmas cards go out? I need to bake. I still don't know what to get my Boss. I hope he doesn't come to the party. The airport and roads are crazy. Traveling is so hard this time of year. That guy next to me is an ass. I need to make the beds…I hope they don't mind that lumpy sofa bed. Something stinks—when will I have time to clean? The family will be here tomorrow. We need to get busy. I'll never have enough wrapping paper. Where the hell did the tape get to again? Can you finish the tree? I can't believe it is here already. Where did the time go? It will be a miracle if I get it all done.

The chaos of the holidays is about to expire, kind of like I am on Christmas Eve. Exhausted. Always so much insanity that builds to a fever pitch. And then... Ta-da, ready or not, here it is. The most anticipated holiday of the year. In living color, in your living room. Bang, there it is. The list will get done and what doesn't get done, doesn't. Family will come or call, love will be exchanged, and hopefully we will remember the reason for the celebration. It's Christ's birthday.

2013 years ago we were blessed with a true Christmas miracle. Without much fanfare He came. The heat didn't work and there wasn't even a doctor or midwife to be found. But still He came. It was a long exhausting journey with an ass. But still He came. The Shepherds brought impractical presents—they could have even been re-gifting. And heck, they were not even invited. But they came anyway. I am sure the stable was raw and rank; it was waiting to be mucked out. But it was home. No crib, no bottle, no fancy feast. But still He came. A humble beginning for God incarnate. I'm

sure he would have been OK with the love: the rest of what we think of as Christmas just wasn't his style. Simple love is always best.

So, as you check your last minute list, there is but one more presence that you need; simply Christ in your heart. The rest is just so much trimming and ripped paper... and He will come anyway.

Welcome Christ...Welcome Christmas.

The great secret

I am not sure when I first learned the truth. It could have been one of my oh-so-helpful brothers who told me, or I could have learned about it in some dark alley. Of course, I wanted to believe in Santa. I think like many, I wanted to hedge my bets. Better to believe and get presents than doubt and get coal. Of course, I knew that all the presents didn't come from Santa. We got them from Mom and other family members. When I was raising my children, we were pretty sneaky. We had four types of wrapping paper. Santa had his own for each of the kids, and mom and dad had different types. When my daughter was old enough, she too wanted to know if Santa was real. I think she asked me the day after Christmas, just to be safe. Of course, I wanted to know what she believed first. It was amusing to hear her arguments on both sides.

Inevitably we go through challenges and changes in our beliefs as we grow up. When we were young, we believed in magic, fantasy, and things unknown. I remember my older brother magically making quarters appear for my son after he had stealthily hidden them around the house. My son was amazed. As children, we are very willing to believe in the unknown. It's not that we are gullible, it's just there is so much we have yet to learn about everything that the mystery of faith seems natural. Of course there is a God—it's easy to believe.

As rational and ideology-challenging young adults, we lose much of our faith. We get all Missouri-like and say, "Show me. If you can't prove it, it can't be true." It's a by-product of our education system. The quest for the right answer. Perhaps it was exemplified by the Beatles' claims about God being dead back in the 60's. Prove it. Many young adults walked away from their faith.

Now that I'm way 'growed up', in spite of the logic programming on Christmas morning I do believe. I believe in the magic of Christmas. Wide-eyed children will race to open their gifts full of joyful happiness. We will express our faith in our carols and prayers. On bended knee or surrounded by torn wrappings, we will give thanks.

Many will have nothing. No presents, or trees, carols or even prayers. The forward-deployed, the impoverished, and the lonely. Lost on this day, just like every other day. But for them, like us, the best gift isn't under the tree anyway. Rich, poor, faithful or not, we are still loved. God is there whether we believe or not. He always brings his presence to those that believe—and those that don't. What a gift that is. That is the magic of Christmas.

I do believe in Santa. I do believe in Christmas.

References

Applying for jobs is such a pain. You can spend hours clicking around, chasing links all over the web. This link leads to a recruiter, this other one leads to a spam site, and a third cycles back to some strange job board that you never heard of, probably a spam trap. There are many annoyances dealing with job application idiosyncrasies and each employer has their own requests and demands: "Please complete on our form your entire life history in 142 words or less." Of course, both you and the form have to be perfect or the machine will spit you out like coffee grinds in the bottom of your cup.

"Please list three references"… This always freezes me. Do I really want to list people that I care about, for some schmuck who I don't know, for a job that I might not want, to call and ask weird or probing questions? And whom do you list? Your old boss—the reason you left your last job? Friends who will embellish your virtues? Depending on the job and the requirements, it would be nice to be able to prep someone for a call. Of course, you would never list someone who thinks you're a jerk anyway.

We're always being evaluated in our daily interactions to see if we're a good fit. To see if we match what it is the other wants. But doesn't it depend on your frame of reference? Although some of my former patients talk about how I helped them through dark times, another patient might say I totally missed the mark. Of course, I can't list patients as references anyway.

If you live your life for others and make a difference, that's all that really matters. Helping to ease others' challenges and make their life more

fulfilling is my calling. Perhaps I should list God as a reference. I am confident that She knows what I am all about.

They can call Her at any time, on bended knee. I am sure She'll answer all of their questions.

Not just dinner

All the fixings were there: turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes and even yams. The kids were surrounded by parents, proudly showing off their crafts and art masterpieces. Smiles all around. The administrators were beaming with pride as they pointed out what made them the 'best of the best' centers. Of course, the staff was bustling around trying to connect with all of the parents and making sure a food fight didn't break out among the kids. But in the crowded room, not everyone was happy. At the end of the table, one little boy sat transfixed with his eyes on the door. The sadness grew and no one opened the door looking for him. But still he waited. Sure, his mom was there, fussing and cooing at him. But a few silent tears rolled down his chubby cheeks; his dad wasn't there, he was deployed.

As we pondered our plates and gave a quick prayer of thanks, a kind of quirky smile crossed his face. Something had changed. It wasn't Mom; she had gotten distracted and was talking to other moms. Curious, I stopped to chat. He said he was sad but it was OK, he was still thankful for his daddy who was being brave. He said he was brave too and wouldn't cry any more. His sadness had turned to pride as he thought of his dad protecting all of us. He smiled and asked me to sit next to him. I guess in some way, I helped fill the void. There was no place else I'd rather be in the entire world.

It was a simple moment, one that is repeated in classrooms, dining rooms, and everywhere there is a child missing their deployed parent. In spite of his personal sadness, he was able to reach within and find something to be thankful for. It almost brought a tear to my eye but I quickly chased that away, celebrating his moment of joy. His four-year-old strength was truly inspiring.

As we sit down with our family and friends, on Thanksgiving and every day, it is important that we remember to give thanks for those that serve. The men and women of our military make great sacrifices for us, and not just on Thanksgiving. Even if they are far behind the wire and not in harm's way, they give of themselves to help us to have the things we are thankful for. Perhaps in my own way, it's why I do what I do.

The most important part of the celebration is in the prayer of thanks for giving. It's really the only nourishment we need.

Updates

It had been months since I used it. I actually have 4 or 5 and this one's the oldest. But I was looking for something and thought I might have left it there. The battery was dead so I had to dig out the cord from tangle hell in the drawer. After waiting the requisite eon for it to start, I received no less than four demands to update. Each direly warning of imminent danger. And of course, you have to update everything before you can actually use it. Update, reboot, update, reboot... And then the updates need updating! I thought the clicks would never end but I feel sooo much safer now. Well, not really—but Microsoft feels better anyway.

Wouldn't it be interesting if we had an update button? Before you get up in the morning, all of the necessary patches would just be waiting there to install. We could get up and have a coffee, and then take a quick nap as our updates install. Repeat as necessary until we're ready to face the day. All of the new information we need to be secure would just be there. A few clicks and we'd be on our way.

I make sure that I manually install my updates daily. Patches of love, God-light, and inspiration are what keep my emotions rebooted and ready to venture forth, safe from the threats of the world.

Strong foundation

It was slightly cold and pale, and near silence filled the air. Grey, opaque light dusted the space with stillness. Four hundred and sixty-six feet tall, the tower soars over everything you can see. By today's standards, it isn't that tall. But the foundation was laid in 1015, and until 1874 it was the tallest building in the world. No wonder it took more than 800 years to build! Generation upon generation of craftsmen spent their entire lives working to create its majestic beauty: a cathedral to rival all others, given to the glory of God. The father's son, and his son, and his son's son all focused on a single faith vision.

We can't even fathom undertaking such a project today, even with all of our modern marvels. It was truly a labor of love and faith to build the Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-Strasbourg. But for all its majesty and beauty it only has one single, simple purpose: a place to offer prayers to our God.

Faith is simple, regardless of your beliefs or form of worship. The church was once the center of all that was, instrumental in community lives. People's time, talent and treasures were all given selflessly to God. Always the tallest in the town or village, the church was the center of the community. Perhaps it was because life was so hard and people prayed for their rewards in heaven. Perhaps it was their form of comfort, of centering, of peace. Praise for God with the work of their hands.

Yesterday I visited a monastery and was struck by the lack of adornment. Just simple plaster and delicately carved wood. But the prayers offered in the monastery were no less important or silent than those offered in grandeur. Although many of us continue to worship, in our multi-tasking lives

do we do enough? We may know the importance of gratitude and beseechment on bended knee, but what do we do when we get up? Can your world tell of your beliefs? It's more than cathedrals or plaster: it's how you live the moments of your life.

Give thanks for the blessings we have been graced with, pray for the best for those we love and those less fortunate, and hope for the future. Live through your actions and craft your own majestic relationship with God. It won't take generations and will surely build a strong foundation for living today and for years to come.

Eve

The gray fades to black quickly this time of year. Clouds transform into grey-cast silhouettes reflecting the pale fleeting rays of the day. Twinkles emerge to illuminate the steel blue, prettier than any Christmas tree. A fractured moon dances reflections off the whitecaps that still thunder at the jetty. But their crash is but a whisper in the silence that reigns over the surf lapping hungrily at the shore. Night air steams from my breath but the still breeze hides its chill. In the distance, the forlorn bellow of a buoy warns the dark of unseen danger. The world fades softly into the pitch darkness leaving the winter sky as its master. The ocean calls to my melancholy heart.

Reflections of the year swim by, each as fleeting as the surf. Of what has been done and what has failed to be, all ebbing in sync with the tide. Woulda, coulda, shouldas bring salty tears to my cheeks, quickly dismissed as the rosy-nose cold and not anything nostalgic. But the misty sparkle in my eyes remains, blurring the deepening night thoughts that reign over the aloneness.

With each passing moment the darkness deepens till the background is but a faded memory. But with each twinkle of hope, the darkness becomes brighter as the joy of Christmas fills the void. Wondrous stories and hymns of adoration fill the darkness with anticipation. Of love, of laughs, and family enjoying each crinkled wrapper and clink of toasted glass. We eagerly await the coming of Christ into our world. Although he's been here all along, we now pause on bent knee to give thanks and praise for all that was and will be.

Welcome Christmas.

Our house

It was the day after Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. Well, except it wasn't my house and the sounds were a bit strange, and *could* be a mouse. I sprang from my bed with the usual urgent need, only to bump right into the wall. I fumbled and futtered to find the magic switch, caressing all the art work on the wall. No switch! I found the door and crept down the hall, still cussing my stupidity and hoping not to fall. Open a door here, no that's the den, off down the hall on my quest again. Wait, I think it's here. I fumble for the door, feeling my toes on the cold floor. Finally a switch, right next to the door.

It's a little hard being in a strange house. Everything seems pretty normal until the lights go out, and then you get lost. Things just aren't where they are supposed to be. Or perhaps they are and you are not. But if you take a few minutes to get used to your surroundings you can easily navigate.

Christmas Eve service too had felt like I was in a strange house. I hadn't been to a service in months as I was on the road. Being a new church, and a new pastor, things just didn't feel right at first. But a few minutes into the service all seemed comfortable again.

And I thought about how my Father's house has plenty of room for all that come. Although we might fumble around a bit, if we follow our instincts, we can always find our way with His light.

Gusts

It couldn't make up its mind, although I am not sure it really had one. It would vary from a light lazy summer hinting breeze to a bone-chilling gust. It seemed to generally come out of the west but not always. Sometimes a vicious downdraft would make you long for a toasty fire. And other times you thought *it's not too bad; maybe it will clear*. Then it would whip into a frenzy again. The weather comedians had predicted as much but I still think they just guess. Patches of sun tickled the trees in the cold, steely grey, swaying and bending in the wind. The tops of the saplings were nearly horizontal but the sturdy oaks barely bent, providing shelter for those that sought it. But from mist to torrents, it looked more treacherous than tranquil. I guess it's to be expected at this time of year.

Years gust by as we approach our winters. Forebodes of pending storms seem more present than any lazy summer breeze. When we are young we are able to dance in the torrent as saplings, devil-may-care in the rain. But as winter sets in, our dreams turn from snow angels to road hazards as we contemplate our journeys. Worry replaces carefree as we settle in for what might be a blizzard and final outcomes.

But the saplings don't know what the oak surely understands, that all storms will pass with time. The seasons of our lives bring new challenges to be met. And with each passing storm we grow in our strength and compassion for what is and what will be. We may be less carefree, but we have become more caring.

Rooted in your faith, you can weather any storm when with those you care about.

The right mix

I never used to read them. If it looked good, that was all that mattered. Easily seduced by the promise of scrumptious, sometimes I could barely wait to get it home and in my mouth. Being smart, I did know better. But yum always won. Sadly, too many good years produced this Goodyear around my waist and I was way rounder than I wanted to be. For a while, I tried to decipher the Latin labels. Monos, polys and lots of unpronounceable things to preserve freshness and add color. Then I just focused on carbs, salt, and calories. Even tried to do the math. Eh, eating became a chore. Finally I did the third-world diet and starved. It worked; I was skinny, grumpy, and probably not really healthier.

When we're young we are invincible. We live carefree in the grocery store of life, grabbing for all the cookies and beer from the top of the food pyramid. Doesn't matter, whatever it is, we'll just burn it off or move through it. But then our metabolic settings change as we get older. We settle in to the base of the pyramid to stabilize our world. Security becomes more important than hedonism. It's easy to sit fat and happy at the bottom, lethargically looking up to what was. We think climbing to the top is for the young folks.

But there is nothing wrong with chips and beer. Our faith continually pushes us with ways to find happiness. Our God wants us to be happy, even if it takes MSG or high fructose corn syrup. But our faith also warns of the Goodyear repentance diet if we go too far.

The key is to not dive head first into the chips with our mouth under the tap. Although drunk and happy might seem like a good idea, it can be a

painful, false happiness as we live through the hangover. It's fine to tip one or two, but there will be hell to pay if we fail to remember boundaries.

In mature faith we learn that we must have balance and moderation. Happiness comes from the glow of achievement rather than the potato chips of easy living.

Take time to read you own nutrition label and make sure you are putting the right stuff in in order to get the best of you out.

The daily grind

There was coffee all over the counter and the floor: what a mess. I had done everything I was supposed to do and had done it right. It really isn't that complicated, although for some reason, lots of people can't seem to do it. But it's the morning ritual. Rinse, fill, scoop, click, and magic happens. Until it doesn't. In a few instants there were grinds and almost coffee everywhere. The grinds are such a pain to clean up, too. I hate having to clean with only one eye open. I checked and re-checked... nope, the water was in, the coffee in the filter, and the lid on the pot. *That's all there is to it* I thought! But it still didn't work. Weird. Then, I found the problem... some grinds had got caught in the mechanism. A swipe of the cloth and it was clear.

Most of us start our day looking for energy. Shaking off the pillow's sleepies, we stagger around trying to go through the familiar until we wake up. For some it's a shower first, while for others life doesn't start before coffee. But even when we do things right, sometimes things get messy. The unthinking daily routines that we are so accustomed to just don't to work. It can be frustrating and muddled.

Of course, the solution is simple. If you pay just a little more attention when you're preparing, you can make sure things are ready to flow smoothly. It doesn't take much to think before you act. Oftentimes we can clear the daily mess in just a few moments, preventing lots of clean up later. Sadly, it often takes a big mess to serve as a reminder.

Regardless of your brew, take time to make sure you've followed all the steps before starting. We all know this, but often forget that we need to

attend to the daily grind for fulfillment. And those grinds can get anywhere. But we can't get to that energy without the grind.

Don't let a big mess be your wake-up call. Gratitude, prayer, and praise help keep things moving. And an extra prayer and some praise for the coffee pot sure can't hurt.

The key

I think it is the world's meanest parking lot, and often say it. There are no signs that tell you this either. It's pretty busy in town and there usually isn't a place to park on the street. As you drive by the parking lot, you can see dozens of spaces taunting you. If you watch, people just pull up and the gate opens. Terrific they think, until they try to get out. The gate doesn't open. There is a simple card reader that you have to use. People pull up to the gate when they leave, expecting that it will just open again. But it doesn't. Without the key, you're not getting through. And there isn't even a sign to be seen. I have come out on many days and seen the gate in ruins as someone has just driven through it though. Most of the time you just see people sitting there trying to think of something to do to open the gate. They try their credit card, pull the car back and forth, and all sorts of other stuff that doesn't work. Thankfully, as a tenant I have a key. At least 5 or 6 times a week I'll see someone stuck at the gate and just go let them out. All I have to do is swipe the card and it opens.

Each day we are presented with many choices. And although there are challenges, free will is one of the gifts we receive from our creator. From the teachings of the great works of faith to being emblazoned in the constitution, free will is a core value. We are willing to fight and give up our lives to allow others to have the same choice.

But with choices come great responsibility. We all fail at fully embracing this. We drive by and see the easy spots and just pull right in, selfishly celebrating our free will. Looks like everybody is doing it. Although easy choices are abundant, we fail to see their consequences. Blinded by our human shortcomings, we take the easy way by what we have done or failed to

do. Until we want to get out and then all of a sudden we don't get it, and are confused.

Today Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Although I am sure he was happy in celebration, he shouldered the cross to help all of us to be able to be free. Today we celebrate that freedom to be loved and to love.

There are plenty of spots in the kingdom of heaven for all of us. But you need to take time to help others open the gate. It's pretty easy if you know how. Simple, unselfish kindness is part of that. I don't open the gate for people for reward, but just to overcome the world's meanness. If you help them to open the gate with your faith and love, you will be rewarded. I am definitely not perfect but surely do have a key.

Lighten up

There were quite a few of them in the in the room, more than I have ever seen actually. I don't think I have ever bought blinds myself even though they are pretty inexpensive. I have seen many dusty, bent-up ones. They seem almost old-school but they do let in a lot of light. They seem to do the trick here. You can raise, lower, or tilt them in or out. Most of their cords are tied up, I think to prevent choking. They hang at odd angles, in spider-like knots that creep up the window when you pull them. There was one set that was stuck at a bit of a weird angle; I fiddled with them a bit and got them to go up all the way. Frankly, even though I haven't been there, I can't imagine homes in Venice having them. But the condo is just full of venetian blinds.

Most of my neighbors seem to leave their blinds closed all the time. But I leave my blinds open, I am near the top floor and am not really concerned about people looking in; it's not like I am walking around naked. And if I were, they would surely burn their retinas anyway. The morning sun is brilliant and I do have to mess with one set of blinds to deflect the sun. I don't close them though, just redirect the light upwards usually. But after the sun is up, I reopen them to enjoy the view.

It's easy to block out the world, especially when we feel vulnerable or self-conscious. We have to fiddle with our thoughts in order to open up again to see the light again. But the Son is always there, even if we don't see Him. He could be on the other side of the world, or just hidden from your view. His light will always shine on you, even if you've blocked him out.

It is so easy to forget our faith, especially when things are dark and we get stuck in our heads. But things always look better in the light.

Yep, it works!

Maybe he was 12 or 13. Goofing around out front, being all cool with his friends. Rolling on his board, pumping to gain speed. Clumsily doing tricks and stunts—Tony Hawk he wasn't. I think he was off the board more than he was on it. He had a bright good morning for me as I ambled by. Hat on backwards, baggy shorts... just a regular kid. Seemed nice, even. His friends were chiding him about his not-so-good skills. Didn't look like they were much better though. He failed a few times to land on his board as he jumped off the steps. His friends said, "Give up, you don't have a prayer."

Sometimes I feel funny when I pray. In silence I ask that God looks over those I care about—I even name names. I always smile when I forget someone and have to add an "Oh yeah, so-and-so too." Most of my prayers are that they find happiness, peace, and fulfillment. I pray for their healing from their physical and emotional traumas. But I never pray for myself. Somehow it just feels selfish to ask for my own needs, wants, or direction. Even in meditation, the silent words just don't echo for me.

As his friend's chiding echoed, I wondered if he was praying. To be the best skater, to make the jump, or even just for his friends to stop teasing him. He failed at least a few times as I was watching out of the corner of my eye. I thought, *he does have a prayer: mine*. As I turned to glance again, he nailed it and slightly pumped his fist in victory.

God does listen, whether we think so or not. We are granted grace every day in the happiness we find. And even in darkness He remains there and

listening. We really don't have to ask; he already knows. The reminders we offer are more to help us remember than Him. So, upright or bended knee, he is there. And sometimes it takes a gentle reminder to help us remember. A simple lesson: *prayer does work*.

No extension required

Electric outlets are never, ever in the right spot. It seems that no matter how many or how far apart they are, you never seem to have enough. I had to string the one cord across the room in my last apartment. It was so inconvenient that I would trip over it all the time. It would rip out of the wall and go flying across the room. I did break the connector to my laptop once and had to order a new one. It was amazing I never flamed out the outlet. When I moved, I had a whole bucket full of cords and a bunch of expanders too. But I had to buy another one to hang my light over my table. It seems I always have something else to plug in. A constant struggle between outlets, extension cords, and needing power.

In simpler times we just burned stuff. Wood, candles, and oil provided our glow. But then Edison and Tesla created a modern miracle with electricity. Now almost nothing in our world would work without it. We depend on it. You can't exactly plug your laptop into a candle.

It seems we are always seeking to become powerful or empowered. We spend our days trying to plug in to whatever gives us that powerful feeling. Our jobs, our wants and dreams all seem to require us to be powerful. It seems everybody wants to be that high-powered success.

But before we can light up the world we have to light up ourselves. We often forget that the highest power we have is inside our hearts, mind, and faith. We need to stop trying to plug in everywhere and kindle our inner glow. It's the light that will burn brightest and lights the way to success and fulfillment.

There is an answer

It's been so long since I have had an answering machine that I didn't even know what it meant. A small flashing red light. It could have been flashing for days as I really pay no attention to it. But as I contemplated the flash, it occurred to me that maybe someone had actually called! I poked a few buttons with trepidation, with no idea how this thing worked. "Just touching base," the message said; "I'll call later." And then silence. How odd. No name or phone number. I listened again, thinking that I'd get more information. There was an air of sadness and resignation in the voice, but it was almost an obligation call. The voice had a hint of familiarity but in the 6 words, I couldn't really tell. After the fourth time, I set the receiver down. I wonder if it was for me?

Our daily lives can be so chaotic. We run around trying to get all of the miscellaneous done. We get so busy that it is hard to even meet our needs and obligations, let alone our wants and desires. It seems there is always more to do than time to do it. On good days, we make an effort to try to check in with the things and people who are important. I used to call my mom nearly every day, just to see how she was. Even after 18 months, I still miss that routine, and her, terribly. I'd check with the kids at least every few days—a quick text. But mostly they are too busy or not interested now. My daughter won't even talk to me now as I guess I checked in too much.

Am I taking care of all of my needs and striving for my wants? I wonder if, like the caller, I am just resignedly meeting my obligations. Although all it takes is a simple touch, fulfillment comes from something more sustained. If you take the time to think about your bases, it's more than a game of

obligations. Your friends, family, your dreams are all critical to your calling. And of course, you will always start and finish with your faith at home.

It didn't matter who the caller was, or why they were calling, it was still for me. Time to answer the call.

A simple prayer

For the pillow beneath my head, for the sheets that cover the cool, for the fan that brings the breeze, for the time illuminated so bright, I am grateful. For the breath filling my lungs, for my thoughts clear and simple, to be able to roll over in the dim light, I am grateful. For memories of yesterday, for the anticipation of those days to come, for the work to do and time to reflect, I am grateful. For the worry that helps me to care, for the things that don't go right and the things that do, I am grateful.

Gratitude is such a simple thing and we so often forget all that we have. We remember and pray for the big things, like our soulmate, or the material things we want... but for the many little things we forget. Simple pleasures and simple needs fulfilled go unnoticed in the blur of the day. But for those that don't have, even the simplest is unreachable. If you open your eyes in your own bed, with a roof over your head, and have more than two dollars in your pocket, you are doing better than more than 25 % of the population. Today, 25 % of the world will survive on less than a buck and almost a million will starve to death.

As we look at what is important, it really only comes down to a few very simple things. Caring for our planet, and things that make a difference for all of us. Being grateful for what we have been given, or the opportunity to have earned. For being safe in our shelters and homes, to be free to make choices no matter how few there are. For food to nourish us and water to quench our thirst. For the opportunity to love or be loved. For all this, and all of everything else, I am grateful.

Although thank you might be the simplest prayer, it is not enough to simply be grateful for our blessings. It is just as important that we live our lives in service to others and making a positive difference in the larger world.

It is through our selfless actions that we express our highest gratitude.

Turn the page

I have written many of them; they used to be required when I left one of the bases. The transition report is supposed to help the incoming consultant get an idea of what is going on in the installation. Clean and simple, the report is supposed to be just the highlights needed to get started. How to get through the gate, where to go when we get there, and something about the area. It is supposed to make the transition easier—hence the name "transition report." Most of it is logistics—typically challenges, key contacts, and phone numbers. Just cut and pasted from report to report without much thought. Not exactly a page-turning thriller but it helps in the adjustment.

Our lives are full of transitions. From the early-year milestone kind, like graduations and marriages, to launching our children and empty nests. Parents often quip that they didn't get a manual or report on how to raise a child, let alone how to live their lives. If you stop and think about all of the transitions at once, you can get a dizzying sense of sadness, relief, or accomplishment as you get to the next phase, chapter, or birthday.

But what if we did get an instruction manual for life? Would we need or read it? In some ways, our faith books are like life instruction books. And although they are right there at our fingertips, most of us don't look for help there when we are in a life transition. We seem think they are more like guiding principles than instructions.

I was talking with a client about faith yesterday and an interesting idea occurred to me. If God wanted us to be perfect, why did he not create us perfect? Surely He had the power. I think the answer is that God wants us

to learn, to be and to experience the wide range of thoughts and emotions we get from living our life. Without joy we would not know sadness, without desperation we may never know faith. The dichotomies are endless. Although guidance might be in those books, just like anything else we read, we need study and practice to get it right. If God just gave us all the answers that would be cheating, right?

In every experience, every transition, we learn, grow, and become better people—whether we know it or not. So as we look to our transitions it is important to remember that we should do our best to know the logistics and key people in our world. But really, the best way to learn is just to be there. Woody Allen said, "Showing up is 80 % of life." I'd add that you need to do more than show up: you need to experience it. Mistakes and all.

Practice doesn't really make perfect but it helps us learn from our mistakes until we get better at it. If you approach your transitions with preparation and enthusiasm, you will experience all life has to offer.

Open the book and turn the pages. And then get to work.

Die broke

It has been on the to-do list for years. I called my attorney in Michigan about it, but he said I had to get it done here in New Hampshire. Making a will is one of those responsible grown-up things we have to do. I guess I am in the majority though: more than two-thirds of Americans don't have one. There are a number of places online you can get an inexpensive or free one, but you get what you pay for. Of course, I also need to tell them what to do if I am half-dead: we all need a living will. An oxymoron for sure.

And when you think about it, what an odd thing wills are. Our final attempt to control our world—to impose our will, when really we have succumbed to God's will. And even as we are half-dead, we want to impose our will on those around us. I'd surely hate for my heirs to have to battle over all of my thrift store treasures or electric outlets.

Few of us like to think of our own mortality. Although we count the years till the inevitable, old is always ten years older than we are. It's as if we have some expectation of living forever. Even though we all think modern science can keep us alive, estimates are that there are less than 60,000 centenarians in the U.S. But do we think 50 is old? Not according to my friend who just celebrated her birthday. For the majority of us over 50, we have less than 30 years to go. And contrary to popular belief, Walt Disney isn't cryogenically frozen. I really don't want to be a human push-up Popsicle anyway. I'd rather be pushing up daisies. Best to get your will done sooner rather than when it's too late.

But when you start to think of your possessions, does anyone really want them? Sure, we may have a few big things like houses, cars, and the like. But

they come with mortgages and empty gas tanks. I guess for the 1 % there might be a battle for inheritance, but for the result of us the leftover stuff is just a burden. We might like to think there are vultures circling, but in actuality, most of what we own is pretty worthless. Used underwear is just used underwear. And we struggle with who gets what. Many people take that last chance to hurt people or at least play favorites. Perhaps they think that God won't be looking anymore.

Thankfully, I am a simple guy. My goal is to die broke. I just need two coins to pay Charon to ferry me across the River Styx. My thrift store treasures can go back to the thrift where they can do some good. Unlike the ancient Egyptians, I am sure wherever I am going I won't need possessions.

But what of the rest of me—my essence, my soul? Those of us of faith pray that there is more to life than death. Whether heavenly hosts, resurrection, or reincarnation, we want more to life than death. We think that our free will is important, but like most things, you get what you pay for. I think Karma is much like our soul on earth. We should all be paying it forward with gratitude and be humbled by grace. We might not ever have another moment.

So I am committed to a living will. No, not the advanced directive kind, but one that defines who I am by what I do now. I don't want to impose my will: I want to share love and faith. All that I have is for me to give away. Why wait until you're half-dead to find your faith? We learn that to enter the kingdom of heaven we have to give away our possessions. But if there is no heaven or hell and I will be just a butterfly or a bulldog, I still have no need to hold on to all that is in my heart. We have much more to give away than our thrift store finds. We have abundant love, faith, and compassion in limitless supply. Let it live outside of your heart in how you live, not in how you die. That will be your true will and testament.

What are you saving it for?

Love

Ever after

It was a beautiful wedding service in a beautiful cathedral. The couple said all the right things at the right time, the minister too and, lo and behold, magically the singles turned into a couple. In an unusual Gospel lesson, the couple chose the section from Romans about Jesus walking on water. An interesting selection. In the homily, the minister used the images contained to talk about the challenges of marriage with lush imagery about being in the same boat, calm and stormy waters, and having their families in the boat to help through tough times. Perfect images.

But as the echoes of the lessons faded, the analogy didn't. My mind wondered about other possible analogies besides just staying afloat. What if the boat began to leak with arguments? Would it just sink? Or a mother-in-law decided to rock it? Or perhaps when it was tied up at the dock and full of rainwater. Would one person just bail out? Or what if one person decided to go for a swim in an affair? What if one of the oars broke and someone got laid off; do they just go in circles? It seemed the possibilities could keep it going forever.

These pages are full of this author's attempts to create images and illusions to get the reader to think a bit different. To jar their thinking and perhaps, on a good day, come up with their own "Aha" moment. Sometimes it seems to be pretty successful. And other times, not so much. But it is always a bit of work to make things flow. Which really is the thought I came away with about marriage—it takes work to keep it alive and afloat. Those of us that have been divorced are aware of all of the challenges. Sadly, there isn't much poetic in many of them.

Being and staying together with another human being in the long-term is difficult. It consistently requires both members to put aside their needs for the other. To put them first—at least some of the time. It takes unconditional acceptance, a short memory, and ongoing forgiveness. It is about feeling joy and happiness when you're with them, and sadness when you're not. I could go on Hallmark ad nauseam, but we all know it takes a lot. And then again, sometimes it doesn't. On their wedding day, it was just about being together, publicly declaring their love and being in the moment.

I do believe in the power of love. Of loving yourself, of the selfless part of loving someone else, and of loving life. If you are able to accept love in your heart you will find it overflowing and ample opportunities to share it. Love can conquer all and if you're willing to let yourself live there, you won't have to think about boats.

As I watched the couple in their millionth kiss of the day, I wished them love, faith, and grace. If they can hold those true every day, their marriage will never be a moment of work.

Perhaps we should all clink glasses every day and remember that love conquers all.

Known parts

It was people-watching at its finest. Standing there at the airport waiting for my rental car to be checked in, car after car pulled up and discharged a passenger or two. All headed to parts unknown. It was fun to speculate on where folks were going by how they were dressed. The Hawaiian shirt guy in shorts probably wasn't going on a business trip and the stern hair-bunned woman in the business suit certainly wasn't going to the beach either. As couples split, some waved a little queenly thing and others had a quick embrace. A departing Marine got a smoldering toe-curler. I hope he wasn't going in harm's way. I wondered if the length of the goodbye had anything to do with how long people were going to be gone. Next to all the love, I saw all the single travelers lugging their suitcases across the parking lot. I hoped that they got their hugs before they left.

Every day millions of people leave those they care about. Planes, trains, and automobiles carry them to wherever they might go. I wonder if they ever think that it might be their last trip. That possibly their world will be shattered by some unintended catastrophe. Of course, the Marine spouse may have that thought, but anything can happen anywhere. The Hawaiian guy could get eaten by a shark or the business woman plunge to her death in a glass ceiling elevator. The parents of the children killed in Newtown certainly weren't expecting tragedy. You never know when those you love will be taken away from you.

So as you say your goodbyes, and even your hellos, take an extra moment to make sure those that you care about know it. Don't let that part of your life fly away into the unknown.

Buy one, get one

I didn't need two of them; I didn't really even want one, to tell the truth. But we all have to buy stuff that isn't so much about what we want, but need. Like laundry soap, dish soap, and other functional products. So when the sign said buy one, get one free, there was virtually a stampede to the emptying endcap. As I nonchalantly approached (I am way too cool to trample) I noticed the fine print. Must buy two. So does that mean I have to buy two and I get two free? Turns out it did. What the heck would I do with 4 - 50 gallon drums of laundry soap? I'd have to build an addition on my laundry room. I smiled at the masses who were about to be arguing at the checkout (note to self, check baskets in front of me before getting in line). Can't kid me, nothing is free. You get what you pay for.

So what is the obsession with free things? The octo-mom sure could use all that soap, but the rest of us? If it's free, it must really be worth something right? Well, maybe not. When is the last time you bent to pick up a penny? But I'll bet if you put a sign over a bucket of pennies that said "free" they would disappear. It's as if someone flips a switch in our head.

But free does have a cost. We know the military mantra, freedom is not free and our servicemen pay for every moment of our freedom by their sacrifice. And yet, we don't stampede to help support them in our quest for free-dom. Would it be OK if we did buy-one get-one-free with their lives? Fifty percent off, perhaps? It must be OK if someone else pays for it then. Must be a different kind of free that we aren't willing to invest in. I don't want to forget that free.

But there are many things that are truly free that we don't appreciate. The

air, the sun, the earth and all the beauty our senses can buy... all free. Yet we toss trash, smog, and clamor about like so many unwanted coupons. There is lots of it so it must not have any value, right? Hmmm… like our freedom, I suspect we'd all be willing to fight for it if it was scarce.

The most valuable of the free can't be found in any store or website. It doesn't require a shopping cart or an M-16. There are no complex rules or fine print. It is not a come-on or a trick. You don't have to buy anything to give it away. It is simply love. Love for yourself, love for one another, and love for your god. It won't even cost a penny. If we loved more and hated less, we'd all be free.

Please feel free to be free. Free your heart from hatred and your soul from pain. If you're free with the expression of your love, then we'll all be free. Let the stampede begin.

Today is the day

I really have no memory of it even though I was there. I can imagine the panicked call to my Dad. My mom had lost two babies before and here I was knocking on the door two months early. Even today that is early, but back then, it was probably unheard of. A rush home from work and a frantic ride to the hospital. I was very jaundiced and had lots of problems breathing. I must have been in ICU for a while. I can imagine the joy and heartache that my parents must have felt as they watched me fight to be here. All of their hopes and dreams under a tiny plastic tent. Even when I came home I know the worry continued; one of the babies my mom lost was due to SIDS. With asthma, I am sure I was never far out of their sight. And I know that at this point they also knew my dad was very sick and probably terminal. What a burden they bore.

But I knew not of it then. Even as a toddler, I was oblivious to their worry. Although my dad was gone before I was two, my mom continued to move through it. Raising three boys in a time before assistance, taking in sewing to make ends meet. If it weren't for the VA benefits, it would have been tougher. But I bet we would have still made it. She was a fighter. And make it we did. Determination and love saw us through.

Of course, I appreciated none of this as a kid. It wasn't until I was a parent facing my son's birth with only one kidney or my daughter's diagnosis with Diabetes that it really hit home. The constant worry, the sleepless nights, and fear beyond belief. I still pray every night for them. Of course, prayer helps lessen the burden, but it doesn't go away. I am so grateful that both of my children continue to thrive and manage their challenges.

My birthday wish isn't for a cake and candles. It's a simple wish for all children to experience the same kind of love that helped me thrive. For all those that I share this day with, take a moment and say thanks to your mom and dad. Without them, you wouldn't be able to celebrate even one special day.

Today, my thought is but a simple prayer. Thank you Mom for helping me to be all that I am today. Today I live your dreams and joy. We did it!

Loopy

It may be the most useful invention of the 21st century. Well, maybe not quite but it sure is helpful. Simple hook and loop fasteners that hold all kinds of things together very easily. The loop side is smooth and soft to the touch. The hook side is rough and jagged. Simple to use, all you do is press one side into the other and things are pretty stuck. They are all around me. I have some on a raincoat I brought, a backpack, and a cord-tie. They work well when they are wet too, holding fenders on cars and even suits where you throw yourself against the wall. Talk about being stuck up! The one on my cord wrap is pretty worn out. After having been torn apart a gazillion times, it no longer holds well. The hook side seems to always be read to serve but the soft side gets all torn up. Although it looks the same, it really doesn't hold together so well.

Relationships can be amazing things. Two complete opposites can be attracted, and in an instant they are stuck together. The more they press together, the tighter they become. Trust, honesty, and attraction make them last. People need to have their space but need to be able to stick together, especially when pressed. Kind of like Velcro, you can pull it apart and re-stick it many times. But if you tear at it too much, the bind begins to fail. The hard becomes too hard and the soft too soft. And then it just won't stick, no matter what you do.

You have to be you no matter what. Good relationships allow both parties to be themselves. To allow them to explore what makes their heart and souls happy, soft, or hard. Independence— interdependence—creates a strong bind. Being too stuck or too open doesn't work so well. You must

be open to be able to experience what makes your heart and soul happy but together enough when the storm comes.

I guess though, I am just an old softy and hooked on relationships. No wonder I am a bit loopy. Things are better together.

Not so hot

It was eerily quiet. The dawn had come and gone and I was still the only one awake. Not wanting to be a rude guest, I stealthily moved about at my usual god-awful o'clock hour. No matter, I'll just go online and... damn, I don't know the Wi-Fi password. She told me to use her "hot spot " but it was as slow as a 56K modem it seemed. Between the netbook I travel with and the turtle-like hot spot, this was going to be a slog. I really don't miss dial-up but at least the old modems were reliable in a knit-a-sweater kind of way as you waited for the page to load. As I typed, I was three words ahead before they appeared on the screen. You couldn't even correct your mistakes until you are sentences away. Of course, the connection could drop any second. I carefully type and say a little prayer for good Internet Karma. My Karma hasn't been so good the past few days, seems like I've either lost my mind or passwords to everything. If I had a nickel for every reset I could at least buy a typewriter. But I shouldn't complain, at least I am kinda-sorta connected. No withdrawl for now.

Connections can be challenging. There are days when you seem effortlessly connected to the world, your friends and yourself. High-speed, full color, and at your fingertips. Terrific insights, on top of the world, and broadband.

Of course, we usually don't realize that we are connected until we aren't. But that is the challenge with Wi-Fi or fragile connections. Even systemic troubleshooting can't fix the issue. We think we are alone in the world with our problems and are feeling blah.

So I could have sat here this morning, cussing my stupidity and imagining my laptop swimming. Racing around and typing furiously would just have

resulted in more mistakes. And although that may have felt productive or vindictive for a minute, really it wouldn't have solved my problem. Probably would have made things worse at the bottom of the pool.

The solution is pretty simple. Just wait for my dear friends to get up and I'll get reconnected in moments. Sometimes old connects are the best connections. As warm as a sweater, they comfort your heart and soul. Thank goodness for old friends; especially the ones with passwords to my inner self. It's good to be connected.

Extremes

Brilliant blue but sizzling hot, the days fade into cool nights. I've enjoyed the extended summer sun but it is pretty intense. The warnings are posted everywhere about how to survive in the desert. Now it could almost be summer at home, but I am far from New England. There are no blushing trees to watch in the desert's Fall. But blustery winds harken the images of crunchy rustles back east. The day's sun is cooler now—gone are yesterday's scorching 107's exchanged for a hovering cool at night. The contrast between the day and the nights is almost as the desert is to the forest. I looked anxiously for a sweater or sweatshirt, finding none in the desert town. I remember the blizzards of last year in New England and wonder how a desert person would survive.

Emotions too can be extreme. Seemingly without reason, they can change in an instant from one to another. From rage to passivity, our minds and bodies respond autonomically to our environment. Yet, some people seem to default to one in particular. We all know that haters are going to hate and the passive will never rebel. Each thinks the other is 180 degrees wrong. Most of the world's political battles hover here. If I am right, and of course I am, you must be wrong. And the indifferent or egocentric don't care enough to care.

When you look at the seasons of the world, you find that all emotions are necessary. The anger over injustice is critical to fight for the right, no matter how hopeless. Yet anger for the sake of anger and dominance will do nothing but scorch the land. Likewise, doing nothing when something is required is equally as wrong. History is full of missed cues.

The challenge seems to be in how to celebrate all four seasons. Each of the extreme emotions is critical to our survival, but by themselves they can destroy us. To be successful we have to figure out how to adapt to our emotions. Our humanity is about just that. Knowing when to be angry, when to be sad. When to just chill and when to heat things up a bit.

Fulfillment comes from being able to experience but still balance the extremes. Without hate, we may never know love. And I can't imagine a world without love. Without war, we may never know peace. We fight for the right to be able to make our own choices, even if they are 180 degrees different than that of our neighbor. Each moment is but another opportunity to master not our environment, but ourselves. If we can do that, the world will be better for this and all future generations.

Do the do

I have really stood out for a few weeks. Although it's nice to be outstanding, I prefer to be recognized for accomplishments rather than my coiffure. Working with all of the high and tight servicemen, my hair kind of looked like an old grey mop. Not quite Goldilocks length, but it had started to curl at my collar. I was looking at my high school yearbook photo; my hair is almost the same length but just Halloween gray now. I don't remember it being so annoying then, it was just the "look." People have said it looks good now but after so many years of neat and orderly, it feels out of control. A single gust of wind and I look like Phyllis Diller. I toyed with adding a bit of mousse and going for the Albert Einstein look, or a micro ponytail, but I have neither the intellect nor enough tie-dye to pull it off. So finally, after more than two months, it's off to the stylist, formerly known as a barber.

But what of love, life, and long hair have I learned since those curly days? In our youth we are much more carefree, willing to let our hair blow in the wind in a devil-may-care defiance. And even if he did care, who cares? We all probably looked a bit rock-and-roll scruffy. Cue mini-series of Samson, Jason, Argonauts and the golden fleeces. That was fine, until you had to get a job: no, a "real" job. Although you could exercise your freedom, most employers prefer the conservative. If you wanted the job you had to look the part. Guess it worked since I had a bazillion jobs. At some point, my chromosomes turned on the black and white switch. Gone are the sandy blonde auburn curls to be replaced by monotone. It seemed to have happened overnight. Given my new despised pear shape, I transformed from a dashing Kris Kringle to a beardless Santa Claus. Ho, ho, holy crap. 'Scuse me, can you tell me what aisle I can find the 'Just for Men'?"

But if each gray hair represents a conquered life challenge, I have already conquered the world. The innocent curls of childhood are now faded gray and straight. Gone are the frolic of youth and executive coiffures; neither just fit any more. I doubt I will dive into hair dye or tie-dye anytime soon.

So it's time to get it cut. Although more than touched by gray, my hair doesn't define who I am. And with each lock that hits the floor, I will let some of the past go and make room for new growth. I will unlock the potential of tomorrow and revel in the lessons learned. There are worse things than being gray.

Although Samson may have found strength in his mane, Santa and Phyllis Diller brought much joy to the world. Let go of the superficial and be who you are. Your beauty is not in how you comb your hair, or even polish your dome. Your strength comes from achievement, compassion and faith. At the end of the day, it won't matter if you are curly or straight, colorful or gray… but how you live your life. Who cares how you look—Albert and Phyllis surely didn't. They are not remembered for their trademark dos; they are remembered for what they achieved.

I am just glad I can still do.

For sure today

Well, it was supposed to be yesterday…no wait, the day before. I am more than sure that it was. No wait, that was last month. Maybe it should be today as it didn't happen yesterday. Now it's the middle of the month already—how is that possible? Why have I waited so long? The list of why's, or why not's, are very long indeed. I need to get going on this. OK, it's time. Yep it's today. For sure. I think, anyway. What time is it again?

I am a big fan of lists. Well, not really, but I like the idea of them. If I get the time I will make one. If I could only find a pen. I left one over here I think. Oh wait, I was looking for that article. Let me read this. Oh, that reminded me I need to check on that. Now why did I come over here again? Oh I love this song. Is it supposed to rain today? Let me check.

Many of us are procrastinators. A big word that means we don't get what needs to be done, done. We have this mental list that we run up and down, like kids playing on the escalators. It seems that no matter how we prioritize, the list always seems to keep rolling around. I mean there are certain human needs that we find time for, but the rest… well, sometimes yes, sometimes no. And for all of us who've ever done the potty dance, sometimes even those human needs get postponed.

My list of gotta's always seems longer then my list of wanna's, even though more wanna's usually get done. I mean I wanna get the gotta's done, but I never seem to have the time. Does that mean we are bad when we eat that piece of I wanna needa chocolate, as opposed to jumping on the tread mill? Well, not really. If we really got everything done that needed to be done, what else would there be to do?

One of the biggest reasons for procrastination is fear. Fear of things not coming out right or just plain old failing. So we fail to even try. We choose the comfort of our cozy couch and stretch pants. We all can be successful at that, right? But what happens is that the gotta's end up piling up like cellulite. They settle into our butt and it needs to be kicked to get them out. The longer we wait, the harder they get.

But there really is no time like the present. We should all try to get one of the hard things done, or at least started, every day. Accomplishment takes action not contemplation. Although the thought counts, its action that makes a difference.

And today is the day for that. I think. Now where was that pen again?

Told ya so

They weren't really arguing, more like poking at each other. It seems a discussion had carried over from the car—or maybe the past decade, hard to say. Back and forth they quipped: he- said, she-said. The lines were definitely familiar to each other, no rehearsal required for this soap opera. Their words weren't even angry any more, just spoken in weak self-defense. But neither would let it go. I wondered how many times the "discussion" had occurred. At one point I even had to stop the volley. It wasn't productive: they both just wanted the last word. It was one of the things they wanted to work on. "She always says that!" he said. "Look who is talking," she fired back. Even though they were both smiling, they resumed their grumbling and bickering as they left. I saw his eyes roll as he walked down the hall; I could almost hear the "Here we go again... "

Some things just annoy us—it's hard to say why. It's almost a physiological response. Our backs arch cat-like and we are ready to pounce verbally or physically. It seems that no matter how hard we try, the response just happens. Pavlovian, unconditioned responses. We think we are smarter than your average dog and can control our thoughts and feelings. But one of the things that differentiates us from our more furry friends is this amorphous thing called a mind. In spite of modern science, it seems to elude classification or rigorous study. Although head docs like me try, the mind is so complex that it makes the brain look like a tinker-toy. They are hardwired together though, even though one is bio-chemical-electrical and the other is, well, unknown. There are no absolutes or always when it comes to the mind.

Thankfully, our mind does have the ability to correct the things that the

brain does. Besides biting your tongue until it bleeds, we have the ability to take action when we do something stupid, annoying, or hurtful. If we try, we all can become self-aware of our annoying behavior. And even if our brain just makes us do it, we can undo it with our words and actions. Why fight a fight that can't be won? All you do is get bloody and hurt—again.

Train your brain to say "I am sorry," early and often. Whether in prayer, thoughts or actions, let go of what you can't change. Don't let the petty stuff become big painful cat and dog fights. Make conscious efforts to be less annoying; and if you know you are, learn from your mistakes. And don't stop trying. How sad it would be if you did get the last word and it was one of anger. Or no one was there to hear it. Christ's last words on the cross were "Forgive them..." Not, "I told you so."

Showing patience and understanding of each other's flaws will let you see that we are all imperfect. We live in an imperfect world. But it is in the imperfection that we find the unique. And it's the unique that brings us love. Dr. King said, "Hate can't drive out hate: only love can. "

Forgive, forget, and move on.

Forget just I

145,371 words to read and think about. Not really that many. After all, the Oxford Dictionary only has just over 171,000 entries. But of course, who wants to read the dictionary? Tolstoy's *War and Peace* tips the scale at more than 560,000 words. Having tried to read it, it definitely needs to go on a diet: it could easily stand to lose a few thousand calories. Still, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* weighs in at over 1,200,000 words. Talk about a boat anchor, you could dock the Titanic with that. Of course, we know what happened to that leaky tub. I guess those guys had a lot of things to say.

As I look to make things clear in my next book, I wonder how I could possibly stack up to those masters. They sure used a lot of words to get their point across. My insights could barely hold a dingy. So even if Atlas Shrugs when he sees my book, my pithy wit will make it *Less Misérables*.

But as insightful and powerful as I think my words are, closer inspection shows that I am no better than any of those epics. The most common word in my writing is "I". More than two percent of what I talk about is me. Boring. The next most common word was "just." I just... Let me 'splain it to you or tell you what I think. I would have thought the words love, faith, family, and friends would dominate my writing. But even combined, they don't make 1/2 percent of the total. Even the insightful are egocentric I guess.

If you take time to think about how you communicate, how many of your words match what is important to you? Do you spend most of your time talking about your wants, needs, and desires? If half of good communication

is listening, and half of the time you are talking, *and* you talk about yourself, that sure doesn't leave much room for many other words. We waste a whole lot of words just saying nothing, talking about ourselves.

It doesn't take the Oxford Dictionary to find the right words. They are the ones in your heart. Simple, small, and clear: *love, faith, grace, gratitude, prayer, family, friends, beauty, nature,* and maybe a small handful more. If I printed *that* book, it would only have one page, but it would say everything. At least in my book—what about yours?

Moments

I am sure there is a perfectly logical and scientific reason for it. Survival of the fittest, or evolution perhaps. That might explain the bad but doesn't make any sense at all for the good. Yet, I am not sure I want to know the physiology. It's like an ocean wave really, an overwhelming rush of pride or love. These are the moments in our lives that simply feel amazing. No words, thoughts, or even sight required. That moment when you feel powerful, fully alive, and fulfilled. I suspect that's the fuel for adrenaline junkies.

The same hard-wire connects to our sad spot. In an instant we can inexplicably burst into tears and feel overcome by pain grief or loss. Perhaps the sad is more like a Tsunami and just pulls us out and down. Funerals, tragedies, and even empathy with other people's hardships can melt your soul into tears. Every day I listen to people's tragedies. Some days it feels like I walk out a few inches shorter from the weight.

But what I know is that we live for the aliveness. Twenty-six years ago today my daughter was born. Although I can't remember what I had for lunch yesterday, I remember near every detail of her birth. Rich with detail, wanted or unwanted, I can almost relive every microsecond. I think it's because it pushed both the happy and sad buttons at once, and I shorted out. All of our hopes, dreams, and future were in a swaddled bundle. Yet also untoward fear of screwing up, making mistakes, and ruining a life were instantly imprinted. How will we—no I, ever make it?

Today she is 26 and already full of her share of successes and failures. Some probably have my fingerprints on them. Where I have succeeded is in helping her to be what she can be. Not deciding for her—she would never

tolerate that. But inspired her to reach for her potential. Perhaps it's parental love that will help her survive to be the fittest.

That is my simple prayer for her today. Be what you can be. Experience all the love, joy, and pain that you must. Be one with your body, mind, and spirit. But above all, be you, for it is you who spoke directly to my heart 26 years ago today.

Forget black friday

Ahhh, Black Friday. It almost sounds like a day of mourning, not the first day of the Christmas season. Even though I just moved here, the retailers and credit card solicitations have found me already. I opened my tiny mailbox and it rained all over the floor. Retail advertisements, credit card offers, and "special" discounts. We have a recycling bin right next to the mailbox. Ninety percent goes right in. The rest of America is the same way, 41 pounds per person a year—most of it to the landfill unopened. But wait, there was something else there! An envelope. Personally addressed, even. Yay!! Somebody cares! Oh wait, it's a bill... less yay. Odd, as I usually pay everything with cash, my credit card or online. This one wanted a check! What's that? I'm not even sure where my checkbook is any more. How could I have forgotten to pay that bill? It must be wrong! But I checked, it wasn't it. It was an old bill that had just caught up to me. Dagnabit.

Ah, the American way. Just put expenses on your credit card and pay for it later. It seems we are always in debt to someone. Really, checks are almost the same thing although the latter is a bit quicker. Of course, you can bounce a check and get away with a few before you get caught, I think. The credit card companies always seem to find you. I am one of the rare people who don't carry any credit card debt and never have. Never bounced a check either for that matter. Truth be told, I'd rather pay cash. If it's not in my pocket I always ask myself, "Do I really need it?" And if you think about it, cash isn't really all that good either. You can't eat it, live in it, or buy love with it. It's really just paper with pictures of dead presidents on it.

Of course, our world economy would crash if we all threw away our credit

cards, checks, and cash. We need them since is impossible to trade real-time goods for services. I can't imagine the doctor who just sent me a bill being too happy with a bushel of corn. Besides, how would they make change? Popcorn perhaps. Maybe I could pay with a bushel of junk mail—I have lots of that.

But our emotional currency is quite different. Emotions are best expressed in real time. Even though it is tempting, you should never promise to pay for the love you get today with some vague minimum payment in the future. It just piles up and even making the interest becomes a challenge. It takes more than promises to make your customer relationship work.

We are all customers when it comes to our emotions. And that isn't defined by a four-page relationship agreement that get when we sign up. It's simple, really: we all want to be loved. To be appreciated for who we are and what we do. We want people to appreciate us in the here and now—on a cash basis. But we forget that we have to give love to be loved.

So as the ominous Black Friday looms and your box is full of junk, take time to think about who you already owe. Before you sign up for more debt and emotional junk, make payments to the ones you love. Not because you owe them but because you love or care about them. Take some time to pay it forward—make some extra payments even. Do something unexpected and nice for someone today. Tell them you love them. It won't even cost a dime. Money well spent.

Promises won't buy love. It takes action and regular payments to keep your credit score high. Emotional cash is king; spend it freely on Black Friday and every day. And in the song "The End," the Beatles say it simply: "The love you get is equal to the love you give."

Now that is the reason for the season. No postage required.

Extra helping

How will it all fit? Do I have enough? How much do I need? The table has to collapse under the weight right? Veggies, fruit, dip, turkey, stuffing, mashed, beans, butternut squash, ratatouille, gravy, biscuits—and don't forget dessert. I think I need more, don't you? Will there be enough for leftovers? On Thursday we celebrate the bounty of the fall harvest by gorging on all kinds of food and memories. Thanksgiving has all the blessings of Christmas without all the commercial trappings. It is a time of simple gratitude, grace, family and friends. A wonderful time of the year.

But as I imagine my blessings, I feel for those that struggle with even the meager. Although we offer food and prayers, there are many that will still go without. I spoke with a client the other day who was praying to be chosen by her church for a food basket—there are only so many baskets to go around. If not, she was going to have french fries and turkey gravy: that was all she had.

Forgotten, they wait for someone to care. We lift up prayers on Thursday, but we need to remember that in spite of our offerings, 21,000 people will die of starvation on Thanksgiving Day: 16,000 will be children. Nearly 1 child every 5 seconds.

Although prayer certainly helps, even Jesus fed the hungry. This year I will donate just a little extra to help world hunger. The way I figure it, if I just skip one side dish, my small donation of ten dollars may help to feed a family for a week. Certainly a few forks of corn or one less dessert is worth a life. If every one of my Facebook fans gave just that small amount, we could save

hundreds, maybe thousands, of lives. Pretty small price to pay for all that we have. Who wants broccoli anyway?

Take the time to care. Show your thanks for all that you have and make a difference in the life of a child, a family. Offer them a few morsels of hope. Reach out to your favorite charity or church. Give just an extra helping to those that won't even have first-overs, let alone leftovers.

I will make room for an empty bowl on my table. For those that ask, I will say I donated the cost of just one dish to help end world hunger.

Alert

My phone started beeping... what the hell! Urgent! From the National Weather Service. A winter storm fast approaching. Residents are advised to take cover and use caution! Oh terrific... just what we need. A winter storm on a holiday. Millions taking to the road and the air to be with the their loved ones. Now it's going to be a slippery, dangerous mess. I can see the CNN feed now.... "Thousands Stranded..." or "Pile-up on Rt 1...". The talking weather heads will delight in pointing to the colorful maps with the highs and lows and of course, the wind gusts and chill factor. Been there, done that. Weather has a way of intruding when we don't want it to.

Of course, on this Thanksgiving Day, the Weather forecast could just as easily be about the dinner table. Urgent, family fast approaching. Dangerous drama ahead—bundle up. Slippery conversations full of highs and lows, and don't forget about the old windbag at the end of the table. The icy stares are far worse than any wind chill. "Family Stranded..." "Piled up anger on RT 1!" We have seen the map before and know its dangers. How come my phone isn't beeping now?

I need to reprogram iOS 7. I've decided that I don't want to know when it's going to be dark and gloomy. I want an alert when things are bright and sunny. When is the best time to talk about what's on your mind? Is there another route to fix this relationship? Tell me what to do to melt that icy heart. Isn't that more productive?

Emotions, like weather, sometimes just happen when you least expect it. And families have a way of triggering many strong ones. Anger from long ago, slippery roads, crashes, and all kinds of accidents. We hold on to all of

that pain and wrinkled fenders as reminders of how best to navigate in the storm. But even the most dented among us still have to get down this road of life.

So as you sit with those who might annoy, aggravate, irritate and dent you, remember that they are part of what made you who you are. You don't have to enjoy the storm, but if you fill up your tank with light and love, you will be just fine. Focus on grace, gratitude, and forgiveness. And even if they make rain or snow, let your sunshine light the way.

Now back to our regularly scheduled program.

Trash picking

It really didn't look like much. It was covered with dirt, bumps, and warts, to say the least. It was in the middle of a trash pile, sweepings from the day's work. Sundays are a busy day at the hardware store. Lots of things to fix, mend, or improve. I guess in their haste people just drop stuff. There was a crumpled, probably undone to-do list, a discarded coffee cup from across the street, and leaves with none of their fall glory left. I didn't pay it much mind but obviously it intrigued the eye. As I walked past the pile of rubbish the man behind me almost dove into the pile. A cloud of leaves and rubbish exploded. "What the hell?" I thought. Was there a diamond in there? He grabbed for the sacred clump and held it out proudly. I had a vision of Little Jack Horner showing off his plum. But this lump was no plum. I paused and looked quizzically. It was trash for goodness sake! He smiled and said, "Daffodil!" Huh, what? That's not a daffodil! Little Jack had lost his marbles. "I'll plant this in my garden," he said, smiling. Duh, flower bulb switched on! It's a flower *bulb*.

How often we overlook goodness in things—and especially in people. We cross the street in disapproval, barely glancing at them or maybe just offer a withering sneer. How quick we are to judge based on what we see or perceive. We think that because of someone's worn, tattered, or scarred appearance, they are little more than trash.

But inside of each and every one of us is someone wanting and deserving love. Not based on how we look, or past failures or successes, but just because we exist. Regardless of appearance, we all have an innate value. There is love inside of each of us that, if nurtured, will bloom again and again.

For a moment, I wished I could see that man's garden next year, to see how his efforts have flowered. But then it occurred to me that I too can have a garden of my own. If you look beyond the dirt and grime, you can focus on the good under the surface, waiting to spring forth. Everyone has a story worth listening to. We all have a little manure in our life too—it builds character. But it doesn't define or limit who we are.

Even if my thumb is not green, I too can be a gardener. All it takes is a little tender care, water, and sunshine—and love—and everything will bloom again.

Just a day

It started out as an ordinary day, not much different from any other day, I suppose. It was New England gloomy and there might have been snow in the forecast—just like today. "You need to get here now, it's not going to be long," my older brother said when he called. My older brother was a rock; I am forever grateful. My other brother was a mess. We all did our best—this page is yet another one missing from life's instruction manual. Still, without them things would have been way worse for her. In tears I booked a flight and rushed to the airport. A million more minutes and several eternities later I had arrived, but she wasn't there anymore. We probably passed each other in the air. She was scared of flying, but this trip I'm sure all of her fear and pain were gone. That was the day she died, two years ago today.

For a while, I tried to block this day. A dark one. I even forgot the actual calendar number. And just a few weeks ago I wasn't sure if it was two or three years. But that lapse did not alter my memory of those minutes and moments that were etched in my heart. So many of the desperate moments when I was trying to get home, are still just as vivid. From the tear-drenched drive and the frustrating airline, to the second I walked in the house. I knew instantly. I will never forget that moment. Somehow the previous 19,082 days didn't matter any more. Today was the day.

As I wiped the tears that day, and many days since, it's not the day I want to remember. It was just a day like any other. Whether it was 12/8, or any other day, isn't important. But the nearly 20,000 days before are. The bad days have all but faded now, except for the occasional doubling-over sucker punch. Is it still hard? Yup, I miss her every day. But she is still there, forever in my moments. And I know she is at peace.

We can choose to be defined by those past days, happy or sad, but that's not what our creator, or my mom, would want for us. I could almost hear her self-effacing thoughts about it. Forget the day, it was just a day. Keep the moments; there are more than a million of them.

As she crosses my mind today I will not remember the bad. Those moments have faded and my tears will cleanse the rest. But I will remember the smiles, for they live every day in my heart and mind. I am sure she is smiling now.

Today is that day. I will remember her love and share that. It's going to be a good day. Thanks Mom.

The best policy

I really don't understand these people. They want to sell a car, and so go through the trouble of crafting an advertisement. But not only isn't there adequate information about the car, they don't answer their phone or return calls. Not very motivated. I called about one car for sale and got an overview from someone... when I went to look at it they said, "Oh we sold that car a few weeks ago. But of course, we have these other cars over here that you can look at..." It's called "Bait and Switch." As if when I got there I would forget about the conversation we'd recently had. To make a few bucks, people will sacrifice their integrity. What's that about?! I often wonder if it's worth it—could be that Dante has a circle of hell for used car salesmen.

I often wonder why people lie. From the little white ones to the big whoppers, it seems we have developed a culture of misinformation. Many normally honest people will lie if they think they won't get caught. They lie about the little things and somehow savor the victory, or dodge bullets about the big. All to avoid somehow facing what might be a simple truth. I see this a lot in my practice. People lie to their families, friends, spouses and more importantly, themselves. I am always a bit taken aback when I discover my clients lying to me. Intentional deceit. Leaving the tangled web theory out, usually it is more of a simple lie about an affair or an actively repressed thought. We play hide and seek with the truth. One person quipped that they weren't lying—I just wasn't asking the right questions! How can I help if I don't know at least know *their* version of the truth?

What if we were always surrounded by used car salesmen? Or politicians? What if you knew that everything everyone told you was a lie? Would that

change your perception of the world? Of course it would. We would think of the world as a hostile and mean place, and withdraw into ourselves. Never trusting, never believing. We certainly wouldn't have a relationship with anyone, or even any faith. If we could never believe anyone, we would never really know the truth. It would be a horrid place to live, worse than even living in a land of hate. At least hate is honest.

In order to be happy, we have to be honest. In order to have a relationship, we have to be honest. In order to be a leader, you have to be honest. In order to know love, you have to be honest. If we took the time to sort out our thoughts and emotions—truth from fiction, we would all be happier. Better to hurt with honesty than a lie. Does that mean to hit people over the head with policy, Bibles, or 2 x 4's? Not at all: we can be both honest and loving.

For sale, one used heart. Low mileage, always been well maintained. One owner. Seen some hard times but all repairs completed by loving mechanic. Have receipts. Heat and AC work; it gets hot and cold sometimes. But if you turn the dials right it will be comfortable. Body shows its age but overall in good condition. No bait and switch: WYSIWYG. Tires good—ready for another 100,000 miles. Needs nothing. Well, nothing except love. All questions answered. No credit; in God we trust, all others pay cash. Ready to drive today. Call for an appointment— yes, I'll answer all questions truthfully.

Take comfort

Grey pallet paints a dimly lit sky, dabbled by a sleepy sun. Crystalized rainbows sparkle from the gold and umber leaves, glistening in the soft shards of morning light. A gentle crinkle of color waltzes by in a gust, as leaves dance on the grass. The ocean dew settles into gentle frost covering the world. Its crystalline beauty brings a slight chill, awaiting the sun's warming rays. Soon it will be lost to the thaw. Misty tears, streaming summer's lost days to be reclaimed by the warming breeze. Fireplace scents a trace on the breeze as it drifts through the window, harkening memories of spiced cider and warm toes. The town is snuggled deep in its comforter as the dawn awakes the new day's warmth.

Our lives traverse many seasons, each with its visions and beauty. Cool dark nights are chased away by the warmth of the sun. We may miss the easy days of summer, but each season has a time and a purpose in our lives. And although some may harken of dark winter days ahead, there remains beauty all around. If you open your eyes to the moment and your heart to love, you will always glow in warmth.

Upside down

The room was controlled chaos, but just barely. Dozens of children romping around, expressing themselves in the hard work of play. Some were focused on games and art projects but the majority were just being zany kids. The energy was high... well, except for one little girl, who seemed even smaller. She was balled up in a cocoon, trying to be invisible. And for the most part she was successful since all of the kids and teachers were ignoring her. I watched from a distance for a bit but decided to see what was going on. At first she totally ignored me, offering only a few squealy grunts and moans for conversation. But I just sat with her for a while and it was clear she wanted me to stay. One of the teachers said not to bother her, she's always like that. But I had my cape on and persisted. The ice slowly melted as she began to respond to my soothing tone with one-word answers. Through the fragments of sorrow it was clear whatever had prompted the cocooning had become larger than life in her mind. Not really drama-queen-size, but filled with sharp edges.

When we are hurting inside, the pain is very real. Often times we withdraw into ourselves and live with needless pain. Although it might seem minor from the outside, if untended the little hurts can get even bigger and create lasting emotional scars. We all have memories from childhood of such things, like not being chosen, being bullied or belittled. If you pause a moment I bet you can still feel the sharp edges.

Simple solutions can be emotional Band-Aids. A kind word or two from someone who cares goes a long way. It doesn't need to be a massive, vindicating, introspective scene, just a few moments of connection and caring. For this little girl, she was missing her daddy. A simple everyday challenge

for a child. He had not been able to fulfill some sort of promise to her, and whatever happened at school today had resurfaced that hurt. By allowing her to just say what she felt, it helped ease the pain for her. There was nothing earth-shaking in this gesture, but it was enough to get her back on path. In a few moments, she went off to find her best friend.

Often times we look for big solutions to small problems. We overthink, become paralyzed, and just live in our shell, hidden in our discontent. But if we allow a caring hand to reach in and touch us, sometimes that Band-Aid will heal the hurt, or at least begin the healing process. And maybe that frown will turn upside down.

Just one more day

It's been a year: hard to believe. Although the edges are still jagged, much of the pain has softened. I walked for hours admiring the snowcapped buildings and sparkly trees but my thoughts drifted back in time with each Christmas image: giggles and laughs, frosted carols, and warm cider—I could not chase them away. It's easy to get lost in happy sadness, and melancholy reigns in the autumn snow.

Her final hard weeks have all but disappeared in the memories, and the good remains ever vivid. For much of the past 25 years, Christmas was a time of home, family and memories. No matter where I was, I always seemed to get home for Christmas. Last year was raw and difficult; it really didn't feel like there was a home to go to.

Although I long for one more day, I know that wouldn't change much. I have a lifetime of memories. I miss you Mom.

Twinkle

They were very festive: just about every other post had one. At night they shone brightly, illuminating the main road. Each had 5 points and the outline was traced with clear bulbs. Although they were for Christmas, they were reminiscent of the Star of David. They had been put up right after Thanksgiving but weren't illuminated until the tree-lighting ceremony when they blazed in glory. But now, a few weeks later, at least a few of the bulbs are kaput. I am sure they are pretty inexpensive to replace but I doubt it will happen. On the one in my gaze, the very top bulb is on the fritz and almost twinkling.

Each of us has our own personal star that can help us on our path. Our friends, family, and accomplishments all serve as points of light to help us in the dark. And often we forget that we serve as points in other's stars, helping them to fulfill their potential. It's easy if you take the time to do it and it won't even cost much to help them shine again. A few kind words or a gesture is probably all it would take. Of course, the one at the top is the most important one, pointing the way to a promise of a better tomorrow.

Be sure to light the way for those around you and your star will always sparkle.

Back

It's the simple things, really, that I am reveling in. Things like being able to read signs, free bathrooms, and easy phone service. To be able to go to a single store, or perhaps two, to get what I need without having to figure out the exchange rate. And after having driven a manual transmission for months, I'll be reaching for the clutch for the foreseeable future. It's good to be back.

For the past several years I have traveled the globe in support of our troops. Reaching out to those who might need some help in their service to protect our freedom. Whether it be in direct support of servicemen or the behind the wire with families and children, I have tried hard to have their back. To be there when they needed a friend or true support for a life challenge. And although in return I am grateful for the adventure and professional fulfillment, with each move I leave a bit of myself behind with those that I cared about there. Fledgling relationships that might continue, if I ever get back.

But home isn't always home. Of course it's where your stuff is, but home is really more than your surroundings. It's about whom, not what, is there: our relationships. We look to our friends and family that have our back. Without them, we are kind of homeless no matter where we are.

Although it's been said you can never go back, there is always time to get back... back to work, back to church, and back to what matters. And for that you don't need a fixed address, just an ongoing commitment to making a difference.

Not everybody but somebody

Everyone used to get one: it was required. Kind of weird thinking about it now, but I bet they still do the same thing in the elementary classrooms. Of course, you saved you best Valentines for those you really liked. We would spend at least a day making our box, covering it in hearts and flowers. In those days we could buy a whole box of cards for just a dollar or so, and then you'd spend a long time signing them, putting them in envelopes with your friends' names on them. Of course, you didn't sign all of them 'cause you always had a secret valentine. How much time we spent thinking about love then is debatable, but we certainly went through the motions.

Of course Cupid comes from an ancient story aptly named the Golden Ass. Psyche—as in, your soul—was desperate for love. She begged Venus, the goddess of sexual desire, for help. She responded with a series of tasks, which included going to Hell. After the tasks were completed, Venus hooks her up with her son, the god Cupid, or "Desire."

It's interesting that we hold this myth so closely now. At its essence, our souls are lonely and do crave others. But in the expressed and repressed sexuality of mythology, we had to go to Hell in order to have our desires met for happily ever after. If you think about when you have challenges in your relationships, we really do end up going through hell. For those that collapse, we linger there until we complete our tasks of healing. But for those that are successful, there is a god or goddess waiting for us.

By part of its definition, love includes some heartbreak. You fear that your secret valentine might reject you or they wouldn't be secret. Of course, it

is impossible for the whole world to love you. It doesn't mean you shouldn't try to love, but expect that there will be some pain. Without pain it is impossible to know love. And without love, we will never really know ourselves.

Your Cupid is out there and your soul will find them... But beware of the arrows, they can hurt like hell.

Unchained again

I broke it and it's my fifth one in a year. The first medal got lost at security when I forgot to pick it up. I had had it for more years than I could even count. It wasn't the original that my Aunt had given me in high school, but it was its replacement. I bought a new one but it was too long and kept pulling out my chest hair over my heart... ouch! The next two were shorter and either pulled out the little hairs on my neck or got tangled in my t-shirt threads on my collar. Invariably it would be tangled up and when I take my shirt off it is well entwined. If I am not careful, it just breaks again. I confess I feel a bit naked without it on. It's just a simple St. Joseph medal, but with it I feel more connected to my faith.

Often times we ruminate on the chains that bind us. Our jobs, our debt, and other burdens. We long for untethered freedom to be able to experience the world. Somehow we think that without all of the entanglements we would be butterfly free. It's true, sometimes we get needlessly tangled up when we aren't careful. Things become twisted and snagged and we have to be careful not pull our hair out. Bald may be beautiful—but patchy handfuls of hair? Not so much.

But really, we do spend our days creating ties that bind. They provide a sense of security. Most of us would be lost if we were suddenly unchained. Those of us that have lost jobs, spouses, and other things will quickly we feel disconnected. Freedom without ties might be like a runaway balloon that will pop when it gets too high.

All relationships involve connectedness. From friends to lovers, we seek to entwine our lives with those we care about. We get satisfaction and

fulfillment by helping those we care about to be better. Most of our entanglements are close to our hearts and occasionally cause a little pain.

The secret must be to be careful with your chains. Too many and we can't run and too few and we are lost. But if we take care to untangle the ones we have, we may find they are just right even if they pinch us now and then.

My quest continues for a new chain that will be just right.

Sprinkle a little

Thankfully, my blood pressure is low—high for me is 120/80. Usually I am way below that, even. I have had a number of docs and nurses recheck it just to make sure. My last doc checked off all of the stuff I didn't have to worry about because of it; that was kind of nice. But the problem is that I like salt and salty things. Henry Ford would have hated me because I always salt my soup before I taste it. Pretzels, chips, nuts, pickles... if it's salty, I like it. I can live without sweets, no problem. Ice cream will mold over before I eat it. But let a bag of pretzels be open and I am like a cat hearing a can-opener.

Of course, there is nothing the matter with salt. It is a necessary part of your diet. But the white stuff on your table is mostly sodium chloride, stripped of anything else good that might have been in it. Kosher salt and sea-salt are much better. They can even be healing for open wounds.

But too much of anything isn't good for our well-being. Oftentimes we chase too much, thinking that it will solve our daily challenges. We think "more" is better. More money, more food, and more stuff. Many chase the "more love" demon as they look to the outside world for validation. But even too much self-love is unhealthy.

So how much is enough? Well there are daily recommended doses of everything we need. Nutritionists have it down to a science, unless you're trying to lose weight and then there are a million choices and guidelines. Seems that there are recommended doses for everything—except love. But none of us can live in a world without it.

So I recommend ample love. Use more than the daily recommended amount. Sprinkle a little extra on those you're with today. It will leave a nice taste in your heart. And it may even lower your blood pressure.

The zone

At the gym, some of the equipment has them built right in; you just grab them and they tell you all kinds of information. Ideally, you are supposed to be at a certain heart rate, to maximize your efforts. But to actually get an accurate reading you either have to stop what you're doing or, like me, hold on to the handles for dear life until it registers. But without them, it seems next to impossible to tell your heart rate or pulse. Just because you're tired or out of breath doesn't mean your workout has been effective. Too fast or too slow and you are not in the critical zone.

Many of us spend our days trying to chillaxe, relax, detox, and meditate away life's challenges. Many things seem to assault us every day that we need to either overcome, get over, or run away from. We seek solace in our own unique ways to get rid of whatever the yuck might be. We dream of trouble-free white sand beaches and tropical breezes. It is one of the most common things discussed in counseling: how to let go and let life. Many of us aren't very good at it.

But too fast and we burn more than calories. We wear ourselves out from being on the edge. And a life spent in meditation poses no opportunity for growth or love. Without things that make our heart race, we just exist fat and unhappy. We are born to seize opportunities, risky or not, to achieve our maximum potential. That moment when you first know love, the exuberance of finding your purpose and "aha" of understanding are at the core of satisfaction.

Do one thing a day that scares you, something that thrills you, settles you, and expresses your love and you will find your zone of potential.

As fresh as a minute

The ticking of the clock pounded in my mind: my little girl was sick. Really sick.

Somehow I had known for weeks that something wasn't right. In fact, I had insisted on taking her. She needed a booster for camp anyway. I remember most the clock in the doctor's office. It probably didn't tick but in my mind it did. A big, old-fashioned one with a large snarling face and large numbers that were way too far apart. As I write, I can picture every detail of the room: the posters, the growth chart, the beige vinyl exam table barely filled with my gaunt daughter. I didn't know the doctor, her regular one was sick. But as she examined her, the doctor was very quiet. Pensive. A burst of rapid questions with a heavy accent. She bustled out of the room.

I strained to hear the talk in hushed tones, over the increasing thunder of my heart. Seconds passed into minutes, each one seeming to last longer than the other. The clock can't be right; is it really working? The second hand sweeps, so it must. I make a balloon out of a rubber glove and we toss it around. The nurse comes in, whispers a few reassurances and does a finger stick. Silence. Humming of electrical. More hushed tones. Another balloon. Tick Tick Tick.

Within minutes, that must have been hours, the Dr. called me into the hall and said she needed to go to the hospital now, right now. The demanding urgency in her voice again froze me solid. I paused, statue-like as she said she thought Alyssa had diabetes. Racing thoughts... Who? How.... Should she call an ambulance? Mr. Rosenzweig? Sir?

Somehow we made it through that month-long day, yet, there are many, many moments etched, as this one, in my mind. All told, we were in and out of the Dr.'s office in fifteen or twenty minutes but I could write another page of detail and probably still have not adequately expressed how much I love my child.

Cleansing

I really hadn't noticed how dirty the door panel was. It's down by my feet and usually I just bounce off it as I open the door up. It is designed to be exposed to the elements. It was covered with bits of dirt, mud and debris from the winter. The speaker still worked fine; it too is supposed to be able to withstand the elements. I was a little worried though as I sprayed it with mist from the bottle. I was sure some of the cleaner would get in, but there was no other way to clean it. I rubbed it vigorously and I was able to get it unclogged, clean and dry. The speakers in the car door were ready to rock again.

We try not to think of sad things in our world. But bad things happen to all of us, whether directly or indirectly. The world can be a messy place with lots that throws mud and yuck. We think we are tough, impervious, and can handle it. We bottle up our emotions, to shield that sense of well-being that is critical to our daily functioning. And although we may still work fine, we get blocked and stuck with muddy thoughts.

The holes are important to let the outside in and the inside out. Without them, we certainly wouldn't hear the beautiful music in our world. But each time we face a tragedy we must cleanse ourselves with tears. It the only way to become clear again.

Today we add tears for the innocents lost in Boston, for Sandy Hook, Buskerud, the Murrah building, the World Trade Center and countless others we name in our heart. But from the tears of tragedy comes strength. Although it may seem that there are millions of bad guys out there, most people are good and caring. Our tears will dry. We will not

forget, but we need to keep the hatred from stealing the beauty in our world.

Cleanse your world of sadness and listen for the music of that great common belief in all of us. It is through this music that we will know love again.

Always and forever

Before I was even, I was a twinkle. There were two before me that didn't make it, and by all accounts I shouldn't have either. Early in a time before early was really viable, they must have given me some of their strength to fight. And fighting they were and had been for many years. My dad's illness had taken its toll on my mom, though she never talked about it much. But even as I was born, they were fighting for him, for us. Three children under six years old, with one, me, barely hanging on in those first years. The asthma was hard. I can only imagine what it must have been like for them. And then he was gone, before my second birthday. But we didn't go away, nor did she. She devoted every ounce of her being to make sure we lived there, and to our dreams. She celebrated his all-too-short life with each of our accomplishments. Things were never easy but they weren't that hard. To this day, I am not sure how she was able to make ends meet. But it wasn't about money; it was about strength and love. I don't ever remember wanting for either.

Parental love is just different from other love or emotions. A single word or glance has the power to cause our hearts to swell or our anger to erupt. We so crave the unconditional that we get, and give, to our children. As a parent now I get it, though as a kid, I am sure I took it for granted. And for all the times I forgot to say it, I know I felt her love. It was just there. I inherited her gift of communication and many other blessings that I can't even begin to count. Even though she now mends angel's gowns, she is in my heart more than ever. I miss her every day. Although we still talk all the time. I hear her in my footsteps, my applause, and in my silent sorrows. But my tears are of joy for she lived the life she wanted and achieved in all that she did.

A life worth living, without which I would never even have been a sparkle.

The short list

It was the usual mess and it never seems to get easier. But it's all part of the process of getting settled after you travel. Expect the unexpected, especially when you least expect it. When I first started, the list of gotta-haves was long. I hauled around this entire mental list for days, trying to remember everything to bring. It seems that no matter what, I never seem to bring everything. The list of regrets is as long as the shopping list for the store. Traveling can be a pain.

As we sort through the things that we need in our life, we go through a process. We first start with all of the amazing toys and creature comforts. If you're at home and look around you, you'll see ample evidence of what you think is important. How could you possibly survive without your...? You begin a sorting process of what is important. The more you think, the longer the list. At some point, you become quite lost and muddled in the gotta-haves.

If you ask most people what they need, many will tell you the core things. Food, water, and shelter top the list. Most will add to the list the emotional necessities of faith, hope, and love. But if you look at how they spend their time, most chase the tangible rather than the other needs. But without the latter, the former is just stuff. Food tastes bland, water pretty plain, and our toys are no fun without someone to share them with.

Wants and needs are totally different. We start with the physical and end with the quest for fulfillment. It is so easy to get lost as we go up that hierarchy of needs. As I look at my list I start to think... do I really need that, or

is it just a want? The list falls to just a few things that are critical, and really, you can't find them in any suitcase or store.

So I have a new list, and at the top is faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love, for that I cannot survive even a moment without.

Abracadabra

Maybe David Copperfield could do it, but we know that isn't real. It filled the horizon yesterday with its mufti-faceted and sparkly snow-covered peaks. You could easily imagine being at its base and both being inspired and fearing its might. It was hard to take your eyes off it although I couldn't imagine being at its summit. And Poof! Today it is nowhere in sight. Not even a shadow or empty spot on the horizon. It's almost as if it was never even there. Mt. Rainier has just disappeared.

We have many goals and challenges in our worlds that are both inspiring and daunting. As we look in the distance or stand at their base, we can't even imagine them being achieved or going away. Sparkly and majestic, they ominously loom in the distance. We think we will never even get there let alone to the top.

And then one day, it doesn't appear so daunting. You look in the distance and don't even see your barriers anymore. It doesn't mean that they have magically disappeared; it means that you have changed your perspective. And although the summit awaits, lamenting its difficulty isn't going to get you to the top. But a slow, careful, and deliberate approach will.

We can achieve most anything we set our minds too, as long as we approach the situation from a positive perspective. We can't control the size of the mountain but we can surely control how we perceive it. Really, it's just another hill. And the ride down is going to be amazing!

Burn clean

Its glow dances with a random uniformness, flicking at the sparkly glass. Almost fluid in its motion, pouring its dangerous light upward. Yellow to orange, clear to opaque, transfixing your gaze to tranquility. Its sameness made it look unnatural. It was much different than the ordinary dangerous ones that consume with raw energy. The gas fireplace doesn't pop or spark, yelling out caution. More of a steady hum, burning clean with nary a wisp of smoke. With a flick of the wrist it can be turned off to nothing. But surely if you weren't careful you would get burned just the same.

Many things produce dangerous fires in our world. From the actual to the emotional, we constantly deal with combustibles. We all know people whose fury will explode in a burst of angry flames with a single spark. When we look at the rage, somehow we are transfixed by its danger and paralyzed to act. Their fury roars and consumes anything that will give them energy, leaving those around them in ashes. Sadly, they often consume themselves and burn out to nothing.

Perhaps this is the difference between passion and love. Passion blindly consumes and can be quite dangerous if not contained. One thinks of those passionate first moments of love when the flame burns bright in everything. But love takes more than flame. Its dance is different from the roar of the log, but captivates us just the same. It is more like the gentle gas flame that burns clean. It is more fragile and easily extinguished. Of course, both can be dangerous unless you use caution, and neither is lit without that first spark.

We have to let go of mistakes and shortcomings that can fuel out of control. It's okay to disagree and argue, but at the end of the combustion, you still need to burn bright with love. Boundaries are important as we enjoy the warmth of caring—no one wants to get burned. But to last, love must continually burn itself clean of impurities.

Say it again

There, it's done. Carefully crafted blog, poignant, and relevant. A lesson to learn from my lens that may impact others. Rearrange, read, reframe, review, re-edit. Every phrase a winner, every paragraph perfect. Almost there... Publish! Yay! Oh wait, then not than, it's not its, or is it its'? Wait, that sentence doesn't make cents, I mean sense. That's as clear as mud. Now I feel stupid and probably look that way too. I should have taken more time but then the moment would have been gone and the muse fallen asleep.

Most of us are blessed with the ability to communicate in many ways. From our fingertips to our lips, words flow out to express what we are trying to convey to others, be it our ideas, directions, dreams, or simple information. We think we know what we are trying to say until we say it. And in spite of what might have seemed like a lot of time in thought, often we are not as clear and logical as Mr. Spock. So we try again, and again, and perhaps even again. We try to refine and hone our expression to match our thoughts. But sometimes words get in the way and we feel tongue-tied and a bit stupid. And once said, it can't be unsaid. And the more we talk, the more confused our listeners become.

But thoughts are like that. Never perfect and complete. There is always room to revise, edit and re-frame. Perhaps that's why we have libraries full of books with thousands of people trying to say the same thing, only differently. I can't imagine a human world where once something was said it would never have to be said again. Like saying I love you once and expecting it to be sufficient for an eternity.

We live in an imperfect world, with imperfect languages and imperfect choices. If we burden ourselves waiting for the words to be perfect, by the time they are, they won't be anymore because the thoughts have changed. Overthinking is just as problematic as unfiltered communication.

Although we need to take the time to say what we mean, what we mean may not always be what we say. Take the time to think but don't paralyze yourself with that burden of perfection. Let the words be the means to the end but not the end of thinking and feeling, Spock's biggest failure was in emotion. There is always something more to say. And it's never too late to say I love you, again and again.

Say it again Sam...

Zoom

The first camera I bought was carefully researched. I spent hours online checking performance, specs, and prices. I remember it holding my attention for a long time before I clicked "buy." It had a short zoom but good reviews. I used it more than a few times and was pleased. Of course, the first time I really needed it, it didn't work. Figures... but it was a bit old by then anyway. So off to the store to get another one. I had different criteria this time. It needed to be smaller, lighter and unobtrusive. I hate looking like a tourist and didn't want it to be hanging around my neck all the time if I wasn't really using it. I bought the next moderate-priced one on near impulse. It didn't have all of the features of the first but it worked well and I thought it met all my needs. Until one day its lens just stuck. I tried to fix it but it didn't want to be fixed.

I got my current one almost by accident. I really wasn't looking for it but there it was. It was very inexpensive and an impulse buy. Turns out, it has a terrific set of features and is even better than the last two. It takes terrific pictures—but I hear I have a good eye too.

As we change, our focus changes too. At first, we look for that perfect relationship. We carefully inspect every aspect to make sure it will meet all of our needs forever. If we are lucky, and keep remembering that, it may serve a lifetime. But oftentimes we forget to take care of it and it's gone. As we look again for a new perspective, we have different standards. We know what we liked and didn't like about the first. It's all about the right combination not perfection. We make our choices based on that and forget the rest. That is, until the rest matters and isn't there. If we used a short focus, we may never be able to see the right details. Looking into the distance

things get pretty unclear. But there are other things that are important too. Close and far, the lens we use needs to see all that is possible without being a burden.

It's all about having a good mind's-eye and knowing what to look for. You will see it isn't about price, pixels or zoom; it's all about being able to adjust focus on what you need.

There are many cameras that will take perfect pictures but a picture perfect relationship requires you to continually adjust your lens with both a short and long-term focus.

Sometimes you find that perfect relationship quite by accident. You just have to keep looking through your lens and adjusting your focus.

And sometimes you just click.

New canvas

"It's just how I am," she said, as she sat red-eyed and tearful. And he just doesn't love me any more. I was empathic and patiently waiting for the catharsis. She turned to all smiles as she talked of her love, of picnics, frolic and music. Carefree days of a new relationship. I could almost see them dancing with the butterflies in the meadow, being nourished on love. Beautiful watercolors on a canvas worthy of the Louvre. But then her demeanor changed. He was different but she was still the same, she said. She was confused, angry and hurt.

Variations of this play out in my office a lot. Although I used the feminine version, guys do and say the same thing. It seems people always expect that things won't change from their perceived perfect. They seek the ideal, and sometimes blindly find it and think,"Ahhh, done!" But relationships don't work that way. The opposite is true for many. They paint their museum quality watercolor of ideal and look to just add the perfect mate to their frame. But the guys in the plaid pants don't fit their paint-by-numbers painting. And they decide if it's not perfect, it's not worth it.

Although love and justice are blind, the real world isn't, nor is it perfect. For love to grow from a tiny spark of inspiration to a masterpiece, things have to change: people have to change. A mere brush stroke is not enough for a masterpiece, no matter how beautiful. But for each side, these strokes can be different. The best relationships are both independent and interdependent. Where both partners can stand on their own but still add images and color. It's the richness and textures that change the ordinary into the extraordinary. It goes beyond the mandatory unconditional acceptance to grooving on their brush strokes and dreams.

Forget the museum masterpieces. Beautiful to look at but rarely copied well. Yes, people change. Re-color your picture around those you find and you may see that they fit your frame. Good relationships understand and accept that, great relationships create new paintings. Although it may not be worthy of the Louvre, it is something to hang in your heart's home.

Wizard

Even after all these years, it's still fun. Whirls, lights, bells and clangs, and now they talk to you to. Even though the premise has been the same for more than 80 years, pinball just keeps changing to make it interesting. Flicks of the wrist, little nudges, and skill shots. You have to get used to the action on each one. If you flick it just right, you can score extra points or even pull a ball back from certain disaster. They are much more sensual than current gaming "systems" and require a different skill set. If I had even half of the money I spent on pinball when I was a kid, I am sure I'd be able to retire early.

Lots of things demand our attention daily. They ring and clang "look at me!" And we do: it's hard not to be distracted by the sparkles. Each one promises things, from simple extra bonuses to the ultimate pop of a free game. It takes a while to figure it all out. The more you play, the more you're in the game. When you're in the groove, the game can be a lot of fun! But it's very easy to lose sight of the ball with all the intentional distractions. And then, down the gutter it goes.

It is important to live your life to the fullest. Without putting the quarters in, you can't even get the ball in play. And the more you play, the better you get. Life's distractions are what make our lives richer and fuller. But unless we keep our eye on the ball, all of that will be lost.

Each day holds new promise for fulfillment. We may have drained the ball with nary a point yesterday, but today we get to shoot again. Little nudges of faith and love help keep the ball moving. If you keep the ball in play and maintain your focus, you will surely win in life.

Pop!

The promise

The birds always seem to know—and they don't even have a watch. Rustles, peeks, and peeps stir in the darkness. Grayish purple glows in the distance, filtered through the sparkled mountains and low hanging clouds. Drizzled, paled, and obscure you really can't even tell what is there. Eerie lights echo the streets, lighting the roads that no one is on. Steam pours from the stacks in pillowy bloom, exhausting the industrial stress in Santa-beard white. Barely a ripple, but hints of glowing rays dance in the gentle current, rippling the mirror's smooth glass. You can't see it at all, but you know that it is coming. Each passing moment gets a bit brighter as things begin to clear.

The night can be dark and long. Even simple breaths can be hard. Always too short when you're sleeping and too long when you're awake. Silently the darkness passes from gloom to twinkle and the world of possibility unfolds. Within minutes the world can go from dark silence to the chirp of a new day. And even though the paths seem light at night, they become much safer under the sun.

Breathe deep the wonders of each morning and let it cleanse your dark forebode. Each day is not promised. Be grateful for each one you have. Things always look better in the brightness of the day.

Every night, every light

There really may be a million of them, but who is counting. There are fewer orangie ones than white ones, lot of red ones twirling, a few yellow and green. When you look at the world from a distance, they are a pretty big muddle. But it only takes a moment to figure out what most of them are. Some are big and bright, lighting up the darkest spots from high above. Parking lots, roads and secure areas. Smaller ones seem to be more twinkly, like backyard fireflies in the summer night. They seem more distant but friendly, mired in the night air. You can tell which ones are homes, they to be a bit more uniform and clustered together. And the traffic lights change from red to green, commanding no one.

Without the light we would be dark and dim. Cast into shadows, wondering where we are going and not being able to see how to get there. Total darkness is never silent as we hear every tweet and twitch of the world and our thoughts. Even though the same noises are present every day, in darkness they become lurking monsters. We look for lights to calm our fears.

Although each does the same thing, they help us to see differently. The big bright ones, perhaps our Dharma, illuminate large areas of our mind. But there are still dark, insecure spots in our mind that they can't reach. The twinkles that remain are those we haven't met yet, awaiting their turn to help guide our way. Still, their light is pretty but unsteady. There remain many nooks and crannies of insecure and self-doubt. For them, we need to look for more personal sources of light, that of hearth and home. There are no demanding stop and go lights. The soft cluster of glow always is always the most welcome sight after a long day, with each of our loved ones helping to fill the dark with light.

The light of the sun helps to cure the world's darkness. But we need to be able to let all of the light in if we are going to be fulfilled. Lighting each nook and cranny helps us to become fulfilled with our own special light. Whether it be orange, red, green or glow, we all can provide light for others as we twinkle in their night.

Love snacks

I really wasn't even sure it was mine. I heard it but couldn't really feel it; well, not much anyway. I stopped and concentrated. It must be my stomach but I wasn't really hungry, I had a good dinner, probably even ate a bit too much. I was too full and my tummy hurt a little bit. But that was hours and hours ago. I'll just wait and see. Gurgle, burble, grumble. I don't feel hungry but I guess I could eat; I think I have something in the fridge, time to go check.

Our bodies need nourishment on a regular basis. The experts, whoever they are, say that if you eat a little every few hours you can lose weight. Sadly, that doesn't mean a small pizza every few hours. You have to eat things that are good for you. So many servings per day or per meal. We used to have a food pyramid, now I think we have a nutrition plate.

Sometimes we are emotionally hungry and our heart starts to grumble. You have to stop and listen to what is going on in your world. Usually, it doesn't take much to take the edge off. A simple smile, a kiss or an "I love you" will nourish you. They are all yummy and filling. Of course, you have to be careful not to love too much, or smother someone, or you risk getting hurt.

So I think I'll start a new diet. A lot of small smiles, caresses, and I love you's. I can fill up on them. They will at least tie the cold pizza for satisfaction, and might be a bit better for me. Four from each group a day to fill my nutrition plate. I'll clean my plate for sure.

Not forgotten

It had none of the glamor and many people I talked to didn't even know it existed. I wouldn't have either if I hadn't been detoured by a road closed from the storm. It was back in a forgotten corner, the driveway slightly overgrown from the spring rain. But I stopped my car and got out. The cemetery was well tended but still a bit forlorn and forgotten. As I read the names engraved almost 100 years ago I wondered, with a tear, who still mourns for you Staff Sargent? Does anyone remember you Captain? As I walked in silence reading the names out loud, I said thank you to each one I read. I didn't know them, their families, or even their deeds, but I knew I owed them just the same. In the back corner there were fresh flowers that someone had brought. The stone read MSG Delilah S. Someone had remembered her for Mother's day. The storm had blown over the flowers so I righted them. The least I could do in tribute to someone else's sacrifice. They were the only flowers there.

I returned to the cemetery on the base on my last day. As I walked again silently thanking the men and women from long ago, I met a widow. She came every Memorial Day to say I love you to the man she lost more than ten years ago. Her tears were not silent as we talked about his service. He didn't die in a blaze of glory and had a simple job. His service may have gone unnoticed if not for his death. Our words were brief as she slowly walked away. Her love still as real as his service and sacrifice to our country was.

I never knew my father, but I knew of his love for me and for our country. A purple heart, bronze star were emblematic of what he was all about. Even after his uniformed service, he possibly gave his life working on defense projects. For our country, for our family. As I walked through the cemetery

I said thank you to him too for his service. He inspired a love in our family that will never die. All I know about love is what I learned from my mom's love for him. It's that same love that I carry with each of my silent steps, prayers, and thanks.

Their names may not be on my lips any more, but I still mourn for them. Their gifts to us are what allow us to be who we are today. My simple thanks that day may not have been worthy but it was all I could offer. I will not forget my trips to the cemetery or their service. For their sacrifice helped you, and me, to be free.

Well spent

I climbed in with apprehension. It wasn't that I minded the time but it was going to be a long ride. Still, that was why I had come. Moments before I helped carry his wife to her rest for her journey home. We had barely spoken in 30 years, and only a few memories from before that even remained. My thoughts filled with wonders of how, when, and why, as I traveled the miles. The stories flowed, some on the verge of tears. Of grand adventures and moments that defined their life together. Interwoven were fragments of my life with memories from before my time. A few smiles, new lore, and untoward grief all entangled. Although sad, there were but a few fragments of regret as we celebrated their lives. The silence fell hard as the empty echoed in its finality. We followed the hearse in silence at the end.

Shallow and jaded my day began. Steeling hard for what was going to be difficult. Lost in my thoughts of what was to be, I had barely thought of what was gone. I had looked in guilt, apprehension, and unease through my hardened lens about the man I barely knew. But the distance between my uncle and me closed from millions of miles to a few inches. In moments I was with him, my mom and dad, and my departed aunt in much happier times. My own tears held back, I was totally spent by the end of the day.

How often we waste our time in things that don't really matter. In resentment, or anger, or some emotion that robs of the ability to feel joy. Being in the moment with my Uncle as his beloved was called home reminded me that a life worth living is about family, love, and faith.

Rest well Aunt Peg, rest well. Thank you for your gifts to him and to me this joyous day. It was time well spent.

Mugging

Coffee has been part of my life, in one way or another, for as long as I can remember. When I was just a kid, and my mom was upset, I'd bring her a mug. She'd smile and give me a big hug even though I am sure the instant coffee tasted like mud. I think she smiled because it was an act of love.

Working full-time as a freshman in high school it was required. The only way I could keep functioning after an overtime shift, with schoolwork still to get done. College was even harder, but without its help I would have never finished it. Grad school for that matter too. I guess it worked since I earned high honors in both. As a young couple, I too would bring my wife a cup—every morning. We would talk about the day, the future, and everything else. Burning the candle at both ends in career building and parenting, it was omnipresent clutched in my hand. After a while though, she would just complain that it was cold. In my lonely days on the road, it was always a comfort. Somehow it helped me feel a little better.

And in this moment, I ponder my words over the morning brew. Although coffee never provides the answer, its murky mirror helps one reflect. In some crazy way, I think coffee provides both comfort and love. But the problem is that the mug is empty again. Gone are the moments that insisted. Job is quiet, kids are gone, my mom is mending angel's robes, and the ex is off doing her thing. The mug is neither half-empty nor half-full; it is just empty. I miss them all as I sip the last pensive swallows in dawn's dim light.

Even though it may not be as insistent as it once was, that first cup always reminds me that I am loved—even if only by myself and my God. A great start to a day that is never empty.

No wonder I can't do decaf.

Better to be exposed

It was just a scratch; I guess I should be grateful. But as usual, me and sharp objects rarely have a happy ending. I don't think I am careless, but I guess I am or I wouldn't bleed so easy. I was just scraping a sticker off this cup, and then a little too much energy and, scratch! Droplets of blood began to leak out. I blotted at it with a tissue and it stopped. I stared intently and it wasn't leaking any more. So I went to wipe it off and it started to bleed again. I put a little pressure on it and it seemed to stop again, but then I moved and red appeared again. It was in an awkward spot so I wasn't sure a Band-Aid would work. It's just a scratch for heaven's sake! I keep blotting at it. But every time I moved the tissue, it started bleeding again. After a few minutes I begrudgingly reached for the aid and stuck it on. It was loose this morning so I yanked if off. Besides the few hairs removed, you can barely see where it was. Now I feel stupid; it healed all by itself. What a waste of a Band-Aid.

Some of us are just unlucky in love. Happily ever after seems to be something that others seem to find. And the rest of us, 102 million in the U.S., can't seem to get it right. Really, I don't think we are careless but it seems that we get hurt a lot. We make mountains out of molehills and red-line people because of their perceived flaws. So we pick, and blot, and generally irritate the hurt and end up making it worse than it was. We put pressure on people to change, to be what we think they should be. And sometimes that works for a while. But unless things get a little time to heal, they still might bleed. Then we get hurt even more.

Thank goodness for Band-Aids, right? Well, maybe not so much. Scratches and pain are part of our experience. If we hide our hurt under the artificial,

we never know if it is healed. Most Docs will tell you, if possible let a cut be exposed to the air—it will heal faster. Does that mean that we should never cover our wounds? Not at all. But as soon as they stop bleeding, it's best to take off that Band-Aid and resume living. In the end, you may even forget that you have been hurt.

I wish I could say I would never get cut again. But I know that isn't possible. But I do know that the next time I will first try to ignore it. And then perhaps add a little pressure. If it still hurts, I'll reach for a Band-Aid—by saying I am sorry. I will learn to forgive faster and recognize my klutzy flaws. But as soon as I can, that Band-Aid is coming off. I want to keep living without fear of getting hurt again. It is the only way to experience what life and love has to offer.

In the meantime, I just need the economy size box and maybe some duct tape.

Awareness

Being azure

The sky was brightening, gradually transitioning from a glowing orange umber to an azure blue. The sun was shaking off its sleepies as it opened the morning's eyelids. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. In the distance there was just one puff of cloud. At first I thought it must be steam from a nearby factory but as I looked more closely I could see it wasn't connected to a smokestack. It was barely moving and I again thought it must be unnatural. It slowly drifted off on an invisible breeze to the horizon, leaving the sky untouched.

I read a story once about how God works. It was interesting in that the point was that God created adversity to see how we cope with it. It mused that we have free will to create happiness, but our true character shows in times of trouble.

I wondered if that cloud was hanging over someone today. Was it a bad morning? It didn't seem ominous enough that we should run for cover, but still, it was filtering the sun from someone below. Even though it drifted past, I imagined that for a few minutes, someone's world was a bit darker. I longed to tell them that it would pass if they could just be a little patient and keep looking up.

Each day brings us new opportunities to live our lives in a trouble-free sky. We have free will to be able to make our fluffy dreams come true. But for some, their days are not quite as bright. They may not need an umbrella to protect them from a torrent, but a few words or kindness will help their clouds go away.

Be the breeze for someone today. If you help them just a little, their days will surely be just a little bit brighter.

The hour

There was this hole. Not unexpected but still a vacancy on what was a busy day. I had not seen the client for weeks so I pulled up their chart and refreshed my memory. The challenges and problems came rushing back and I was full of contemplation and anticipation. I knew where we needed to go; it was all about where we were and how to re-engage. And poof, they didn't come in—called and left a message to reschedule. Like a bathtub draining, all of the energy swirled away. Now what?... a free hour! Normally a sought after respite, but today, not so much. I wanted to be distracted. Too much stuff on my mind. So... I was up to date on all of my paperwork, had checked my email, Facebook, went potty, and was on top of my game. Not enough time to go out: the next client was scheduled in 58 minutes. I straightened my desk... 20 seconds gone. I can just waste an hour surfing, I thought. Click, click, click... all caught up on the news. Depressing. Fifty minutes to go. More coffee? Nah, I don't feel like it. A quick stroll down the hall, all the doors were closed... no one to chat with. Forty-five minutes now. Time to contemplate life for a while... ew, yuck, more bad than good today. Best to get more distracted. Forty minutes. Tick, tick, tick. Just a half-hour to kill now. Now what? And then the list came rushing back. I had to call the doctors, call the insurance company, and return two emails. Now there wasn't enough time.

They say a minute is a minute no matter what. It's always 60 seconds. One Philadelphia, two Philadelphia, three Philadelphia...count slowly and you'll get to a minute. But some minutes take hours and other hours fly by in moments. When your heart is full of joy the minutes pass quickly in bliss. When the weight of the world, or your world, is on your shoulders there must be thousands of seconds in each and every minute.

Most of the time we don't think about time. It passes unnoticed. Time becomes important only when something needs to get done, or undone. A deadline, an appointment. Or conversely, when you're out of time... it's time to go, how much time is left, etc. Time to get up, time to go to bed, time to make the donuts. Let's get there just in time, so we can be on time. Can you be off time? Sure, when you get lost in a world of woulda, coulda, shoudas, or fantasies and daydreams. Of course there are no timepieces in those lands.

When you think back, there never seems to be enough time for what gives us the most joy. We will never say "I wish I spent less time with my friends or my family." Fulfillment comes from spending your time with those things—and people—that matter.

In the remains of the day, many things often seem left undone. I have had many excuses for not getting the done, done. But there is no time like the present. Remember, it's a gift.

Given not earned

They were stylin' and profiling in front of the mirror. Him, with his hair moussed up in sharp points and triangle gauge earrings. Her, sporting red rainbow hair and more piercings than I could count. They were both inked on the neck. They already both had a "look" that was supposed to be casual but somehow looked chic-contrived. It was just toooo, toooo. Neon, moussed, torn, and color-clashing they looked like they stepped out of some new-aged grunge magazine in NYC, not a thrift store in New Hampshire. A mountain of clothes next to them, Pretty Woman style, they were trying on everything over their urban street clothes. It wasn't clear what they were shopping for, maybe a job interview or a formal. They took turns popping in and out of the dressing room in ultra-conservative clothes. The clerk seemed a bit annoyed as the pile to re-hang was growing. "Now you look respectable," she said, in a hurry-up-and-be- done kind of way. They stood side by side in the mirror and I thought, *Now there's a new American Gothic.*

If I had seen them from the neck down, or perhaps a glance from behind, I wouldn't have even noticed them. Just a regular couple going about their business. That is, until their modern urban poked through their collar. I confess that sometimes the ink and piercings make me cringe in empathetic pain. I wonder how that will look in twenty years.

But still, to each their own. How quickly we are willing to make assumptions about them. Their thoughts, dress, and bodily attire were surely not my style but so what? Of course they deserve common courtesy. But what about respect? And what does it take to be "respectable?" I had a teen client once tell me I was "respectable." I was taken back—and a bit offended. Like when people call me "Sir." They must be confused, I think.

The saying goes that respect must be earned. If you conjure up an image of "respectable" I bet most of us imagine conservative. How odd. Do men have to wear ties and women dresses to be respectable? Do people have to earn our precious unalienable rights? Does our planet have to earn our respect so we don't litter? So, if people somehow don't play to our own self-centered views, it's OK if we treat them like trash?

I think perhaps the phrase is backwards. Respect is to be given, not earned. Being respectable is not what you look like, it's about what you think like—and how you act. Even if your thinking (or dress) is not conservative, you're still worthy of being respected. But more importantly, you're still able to give respect to others. And if we all could give a little more of what we want for ourselves to others, others, in turn will give it back. Funny how that works. The point is, it does work!

Sing along with me now… R-E-S-P-E-C-T… tell you what it means to me…

Under the cypress tree

The heat was oppressive. It wasn't too bad when I started on my hike this morning but now it was in the high 90's. With each step I got a little hotter. I wondered how much further I had to go. The hike wasn't all that strenuous but it was a little uphill. Felt like climbing Mt. Rainer in the heat, though. I kept thinking that I would see the trailhead any minute. Maybe I had turned the wrong way? How long it would be before they found my bleached white, picked-clean bones? I had brought plenty of water so I wasn't dehydrated but I was beyond damp. My clothes all clung and tugged. I felt like I was in a sauna. There wasn't even a breath of air. I started to dream of the air conditioning in the car, if I ever found it again. One foot in front of the other, I trudged along. Nothing in the desert escapes the heat.

As I rounded the latest gathering of crushing boulders sunning themselves, I was startled. In the middle of the beige and burnt desert there was a clump of green. I blinked: must be the heat. A quick eye rub showed a large cypress tree. It had to be ten foot at least. Thriving in a crumb of shade from the rock, it now created its own. A blanket of needles littered the sand creating a resting spot for a zebra Lizard who scurried away in annoyance at my intrusion. I paused and enjoyed what seemed to be a ten-degree difference, at least in my mind.

Sometime things get oppressively hot in our worlds. We trudge thorough, wondering if we will ever make it. Sweaty and cranky, we think that our problems will never end. In the noon of the day, things get way beyond uncomfortable. And even though each problem alone is solvable, in mass it seems that they will crush us.

But at each turn, we never know what we will find. It maybe an Air Conditioned escape or just a brief oasis from the heat. I realized today how grateful I am for even the simple in the heat. My simple smile, a soft blanket to cuddle in, and a brief gust of cool was enough to get me moving again. Somehow, it didn't feel as hot the rest of the way back to the car.

Even in the desert, we can find, or be, an oasis. If you keep walking through your challenges, you will eventually get through them. Simple prayer, gratitude, and a little work will see you through even the hottest of times. If you can't take the heat, you shouldn't make the journey. But how sweet your reward is when you reach the air conditioning.

Round 'em up

I am no historian but I believe it's what helped fuel America's expansion into the desert. The California gold rush of 1848 pulled folks from their comfort in search of wealth and the emerging American dream. They arrived tattered and torn, staked their land, and began to build a future for their families. It is an American ideal and part of the folklore of our beginnings. As I hike through the desert I can almost hear the thunderous hoofs of the cattlemen chasing their steers to the watering hole. You almost expect the Duke to appear leading a band of ten-gallon white hats chasing the James Gang into the hills. Protect the women and children, circle the wagons. Transportation thrived with the expansion of the railroads. Schools and libraries were built and the settlers began to eek out an existence. Louisa May Alcott glamorized the ideal in her beloved writings.

In spite of the glamorous look back, times were probably harder than we could even imagine. Raising cattle here must have been extremely difficult. Trolling in a stream looking for glistening rocks while fearing desperados probably wasn't very rewarding. Although men were men and women something less, they had little of the discretionary time that we now think of as our right.

As the rush panned out, we began to think differently of the times. Over 10,000 Native Americans were removed from their land and over 5,000 murdered. We now speak derisively about Gold Diggers and Panhandlers. Imagine the debate in Congress today if the same occurred. But our government and our people somehow decided it was right to just take what we wanted. An American ideal gone bad.

I wonder how it might have been different if our ideals were gregarious versus greedy? If somehow we had joined forces with the Native Americans to conquer the wilderness. Incorporating all of their values into the melting pot of the time. I suspect we would be in a very different place now.

But of course, in spite of our modern credo, we didn't value diversity then and barely do so now. We espouse that America is the land of opportunity where hard work will get you ahead. That is, as long you have a pale complexion. We don't deal well with the rainbows of the Native-American, African-American, Chinese-American or any other hyphenated American. But it was on their backs that the country we treasure was built.

So the next time you look derisively at someone different, remember that without them we would not have what we value most. Sure, the Patriots fought for our independence and we would have had a nice piece of the east coast. Oh wait, there were people there too before us.

Until we can figure out that all that glitters is not gold, we will continue to struggle in the world. Acceptance, diversity, and celebrating our differences is what makes us great. If we can figure out how to learn from each other, rather than kill each other, what a lovely place this would be.

Round 'em up cowboy, let's rustle us up some happiness.

Pokey

I saw it all, and he was right. But the second guy always gets the heat. It was just a momentary tiff but he just hauled off and poked her. Not hard, but enough to give her a bruise and get her attention—which was the point. She protested way louder than necessary, making sure the universe heard. She was actually grabbing his toys and flirting in a 5th grade courting ritual. One teacher came running over to discipline the boy. He immediately protested, "She provoked me!" And even though he was right, he so got busted. She just stuck out her tongue and walked away in self-satisfaction.

How often we let ourselves be provoked. Most of us know better but few of us have the ability to see it coming. We feel we must fight and defend whatever the assault is. How dare they! But what usually happens is that we end up feeling like crap, letting the other person win and getting busted.

Sometimes being provoked produces change. Some people tell me that my writing is provocative. It makes them think about things differently. Maybe bruise the old grey cells into an "Ah-ha" moment. The "Ah-ha" is the goal, but I really don't beat people up.

Being too provocative always gets folks in trouble. Some people use it as a test to see how others will react. Kind of like poking them in the ribs. Facebook used to do that and I think buried somewhere you still can. Ouch. I think I prefer to say that my writing promotes, rather than provokes, critical thinking.

Prompting is good—provoking is bad. Simple. Remember that the next time someone starts poking you in the ribs. If you strike back, you will

get busted and bruised. I often quip to clients that the only way to solve a problem is to get out of the ring and problem-solve. In boxing you just beat the tar out of someone until they bleed. Someone might get a trophy but really, is it worth it?

Thinking about what you do before you do it will usually result in a better result than just poking around. It's kind of childish anyway.

Parts is parts

They really don't hurt, except when I pick at 'em. It's kind of hard not to though. For some of them, it just takes a little scratch and they come right off. Little patches of dry skin, the Doc says. But it seems that I exploded with them in the past six months. If you run your hand along where it used to be nice and smooth, now it's bumpy. Kind of like foothills in the desert. But since I asked, she'd be happy to blast some of them off! Well sure! *That's what I came for*, I thought. I was a little excited to get rid of these annoyances. Zap, zap, zap and 10 minutes later I looked like I was attacked by killer bees. Lots of swollen red spots. We'll have to chop these other things off too... snip, snip, snip. Now I am a leopard of Band-Aids. As I run my hand over my now rougher terrain, my first thought is sandpaper. How handy I can be in the wood shop! So much for baby-bottom smooth. Getting old is not so much fun.

Our skin is the largest organ in our body. It serves as a protective barrier to keep all of our insides in and the outsides out. Without it, we would just be a mushy pile of bloody bones. As we get older, it starts to show its age and scars. If you examine yourself, you will find all kinds of bumps and scars. I have this small scar on my lip, and one on my arm for childhood adventures. But like my skin tags, most people can't see them. Except I can, when I stand in front of the stark mirror. Every flaw, bump and scar seems to say, "Look at me!"

But today, after having tried to get rid of all of those flaws, I find that I am still a mess. I have bigger bumps than before and will probably have some scars from the snipping. I sure hope I don't get a bill for each spot, but I probably will. And what's worse, she even wanted to freeze more... I'd be cranberry Jell-O if she did.

As I contemplate my new bumps, I think about life directions. No matter what, there will always be bumps. Some big, some little, and some just annoying. In spite of the best of intentions, you end up getting what you get. I didn't wish for my bumps any more than I wished for a big doctor's bill. You can try and get rid of those emotional scars and life trauma, but really they are as much part of you as your blood and guts.

So today I am grateful for all of my bumps. They are what they are, and made me who I am—a little rough on the edges, but with a lot of grit. I have a thick skin and a short memory, as long as I don't study my flaws in the mirror. Without life's adventure, I'd be nothing more than a melted bowl of Jell-O, and that isn't fun at all.

If you reframe your thinking and you will find that you are probably OK just the way you are. Accept your flaws and look forward to your next adventure. All of your parts are part of you. How cool to always have goose bumps!

In your lane

I was a bit late and obviously they weren't. Not "I need to run your butt off the road late," but annoyingly late. Seven and a half miles under the speed limit, they putt-putted on the single lane no-passing road, oblivious to my urgency. They must be drunk, or old, or gasp... both! Side to side they drifted, never quite leaving the lane but being anything but in the middle. Stupid Sunday driver. Maybe it was a kid... texting I'll bet. It was obvious they weren't looking in their mirror or they would have known. I should flash my lights or beep my horn! Dagnabit! The road widened. I breathed a hallelujah as I roared up next to them ready with a withering glare. It was a middle-ageish woman. Her hair was a mess and her face was reddened from tears. For a moment our eyes met, and she managed a weak smile. I withered back into my seat hoping to be invisible. She never really saw me though, lost in her own unknown sorrow. My empathy caused me to well up for a moment, my own angst somehow not as important anymore. The light changed and off we went back on the road to stranger land.

How often we forget that we are not the center of the world. We get lost in our own lane and feel everyone should move as fast as we do or accommodate us. If they don't, they are just nincompoops or something worse. Our needs are way more important than their incompetence. We quickly judge them and want them to pull over, so we can get by horns a- blaring.

But everyone is entitled to their space in their own lane. Each person's road is different—although at the end of each one, we all are racing toward the same destiny. The woman's tears could have been trivial or tragic—but who am I to judge? I imagined the impact of my rudeness if I had beeped or flipped her off. At best it would have confirmed her cynicism about human

nature and at worse, sent her over the edge. How would waving with one finger help her go faster?

The rest of the trip my mind wandered through her imagined pain. A little prayer or two lifted for her sorrow. I hope things got better for her; I've been there too. In spite of all of my fretting, I still made it to my destination in time.

Back it up

We all have those days. Things seem to be going fine and then bam! We get set back on our heels and wonder if anyone got the license of the truck that just ran us over. It can take your breath away. It seems that everything lines up and lets loose all at once. How could we have been so blind? We just sit there and shake our heads, wondering, why me?

So 99.9 % of you were thinking about what a crummy day I had. You were relating to your own crumbs, aligning in empathy. But actually, I wasn't talking about a bad day. I was talking about an amazing day. It seemed that everything I touched yesterday not only went well, it was exceptional. I was a great therapist, friend, dad, and even shopper. I got to watch my team play football, there was a joyful parade in Boston, and I am finally starting to feel better. The autumn colors were breathtaking and it was a warm day. It really couldn't have been any better.

So why are we so quick to jump on the pity bandwagon? Does misery love company? We are always quick to align with "poor me," but rarely align with "rich me." Do we relate more to suffering than joy? I had a friend that used to answer "How are you?" with "Outstanding!" It would set me back on my heels every time.

Every day a million more things go right in our world than wrong. It seems only to take one not so perfect thing to ruin our day. But if we pause and think differently, we will see that really, the amazing is already there. We just have to pause and see it. And Bam! There it is. Family, friends, love, nature, and faith. It's all right there lined up with, not against, us.

Be grateful for all that you receive. Each and every day is a gift full of happiness and joy. Open your eyes and share your joy. Let people know that you are happy to be alive, happy to be there and in the moment.

I hope that truck backs up and runs over me again. It was perfect.

Fly away

They were very cute. It's not something I normally think of when I look at senior citizens, especially since I am way closer to them than the 20-something trendsetters. He was almost a caricature. He was wearing a natty straw hat, an Aloha shirt, long pants, and stride rites. I got an extra grin from the shoes as I imagined his hidden knee-high black support socks. I shuddered thinking that could be me in 20 years. She was a bit more together, wearing a fruit print sundress, sandals, huge starlet sunglasses and a sun visor. Lights shone bright from her blood-red fake fingernails. Somehow they weren't right with the swirly sundress. I imagined she had a velour sweatsuit in her carry-on. They could have walked right out of some 50's advertisement for a visit to Nassau.

I imagined a yellowed page stuck to their refrigerator about sea and sand. Maybe a Mason jar on top full of nickels and pennies, emblazoned in a shaky hand, "Vacation Fund." And those hands were now clasped together as they walked through the airport, a bit dazed by the glamour and glitz. It seems they were lost and had stopped someone for directions to the ticket counter. They must have gotten what they needed as I heard them remark, "Let's get going, we don't want to be late! Life's too short!" And now, they were finally going... after all these years.

I often hear that phrase, "Life is too short." Many of my clients either say it directly or imply it in discussing their woes. If you think back to when your dreams were new, you probably couldn't imagine yourself being in the here and now. Your life's dreams all wrapped up neat and hung on the refrigerator with a magnet. Carefully saving, planning, and dreaming. Did it work out in a Normal Rockwell kind-of-way? Probably not.

But looking at this couple, you could feel their age-old married tension melting away as they readied themselves. Although tattered, worn, and a bit yellowed, life really hasn't been too short for them. I imagined a brown bag full of old bills and coins ready to buy their ticket. I bet he has an accordion of grandkids pics in his wallet that makes them happy. I wondered how long it took for them to get to their dream. I shared in their joy, imagined black suspender socks and all.

But the question remains, is life too short? Many of us believe in a glorious afterlife. Pillowy clouds, wings, and adoration await. It will be amazing—assuming I don't get the express flight south. Either way, I am in no hurry. Is it too short when you're sad? Not at all. We can't wait for the happy. So when is life too short? It is only too short when it is full of yellowed, tattered regrets. But if you can keep your dreams alive, the past will remain past and you can wing your way to a sunnier future.

Dust off your hat, grab your sandals, and live your dreams. Don't regret your life—live it. Only you can buy your ticket to happiness.

The cure

After ten days, it still hurts. Well, not hurt like a stick-in-the-eye hurt, just yuck. It started with a single sneeze and has traveled the gamut of bodily systems. It's odd though, it seems to have a mind of its own. One day my chest will be tight, the next day, my eyes watery. From donkey dung to seemingly on the mend, it's a roller coaster. Some mornings and evenings I look for the undertaker's phone number, but then during the day I seem to feel better. On Sunday I felt really good. But it seems to be going downhill again. Today my head is stuffy and my chest is sandpaper raw. Of course, I could go to the doctor but my symptoms seem more bizarre than the bug itself. "Well you see Doc, sometimes it's my head but then other times my heart. Oh, now and then it's my chest... " I can see her reaching for the loony-bin hotline. So off I go to the drugstore to see what they have for today's symptom.

For those of us who've been sick, and I think that is everyone, we all know the symptoms. Although for each of us they are a bit different, we all can agree that we feel the same. Poopy, I think, is the technical term. In spite of your best over-the-counter efforts, sometimes these things just hang on. It makes us a little crazy and no pills will cure our ills.

Our hearts and minds get sick too. People come to me every day because they aren't feeling good. Some come with handfuls of prescriptions, none of which seem to do much good. They tell me of their heartaches and sadness, hoping that I have a magic pill for them. Self-pity is pretty infectious. Sadly, there are no pills that cure our hearts and souls.

Does that mean we can't feel better? Of course we can! But you can't find

answers over-the-counter or in the bottom of a pill bottle. Although we can be sad, confused, and even angry, we get to choose how that will impact our day. We all have power over our thoughts; in fact, you are the only one that does. You *can* make yourself feel better—do you know that you can't be angry and laughing at the same time? Happiness is just as infectious as self-pity. True, sometimes we need some antibiotic love from those that care about us but we still have to master our thoughts.

Time, love, and positive thinking will be the Rite-Aid for what ails you. Just think: with each sneeze you get a blessing. It's just what the doctor ordered.

Make a wish

There were only three of them today; some days I have as many as five. My calendar gently nudges me to say those two words to someone nearly every day: "Happy Birthday." My daughter's is Friday, hard to imagine she'll be 26. I remember the day she arrived like it was yesterday. My wife worked so hard—it was our first child. More than twelve hours of labor and no union break. My excitement, the anticipation, all mixed in with empathy and rolling pain. And out my daughter erupted with barely a cry. Her eyes focused intensely on the new world around her. She stared silently into my eyes and seemed to be saying, "I got this—I'll take it from here." I can still remember my fears and the lump in my throat. She focused on my face... What had we done? Would I, could I, how will I? Dr. Seuss had nothing on my personal nonsensical rhyme.

Each year we celebrate our first day. For a handful of us, our birthdays are a national holiday. We all celebrate the births of a few presidents and of course the birth of Christ. But as amazing as these days are and were, on our birth day we really hadn't done much of anything yet—just existed. Washington wasn't crossing the Delaware and there were no miracles from the manger. Even though we were all present at our own birth, none of us had much to do with it or even remember it. We were born in fulfillment of someone else's dreams. And with the exception of Easter, the world does not usually remember most of our exits either. Just names on sun-bleached tombstones.

But with birth we celebrate potential. Not what is, but what will be. We mark our accomplishments from that day forward collecting all that is good, all that is bad, and just all that is. And like baby's first, we look back and

see how much we've grown. Milestones, memories, and the road traveled has been hard labor. And as much as we want to forget our starting points, every one of our journeys began on our birth day.

So today I bid you "Happy Birthday." Let today be the beginning of what you still can be. The hopes and dreams of those that care about you got you to this point—but now the rest is up to you. Forget the tears and painful labor; they are in the past. Seize the moment and begin to live. So have some cake and celebrate where you've been. And even if the fire department responds to your candles, enjoy their flickering beauty. Life is too short to not be in the moment. Make your wish for your future and get to it. Today is the first day of your next accomplishment, the first day of the rest of you.

You got this—take it from here. Happy Birthday!

Just git

Her southern accent was charming but her words were very sad. As she settled in my office I thought, *What do I have to give this old woman?* Although we had just started, it was clear she'd had a hard life. Tale after tale of misfortune, tears, and trauma. Slightly stooped and frail she still was a commanding presence. Salt and peppered hair pinned tight to her head with a few flyaway ends. A light, grayed-white sweater over a slightly tattered gingham dress. As she spoke, she faded further into the chair, lost in memories. But she was clear and logical as she led me down her life's path. We walked in step, her slightly ahead, me panting behind. Punctuated by irascible smiles, she told of husbands and children gone wrong, the death of her saintly parents, and the pain of a stillborn. But still a hopeful portrait of salvation by family and faith. Fully immersed in her world, I listened with slight trepidation of what she might ask of me. But she never did ask anything, or even complain really. It was more like an ear she needed. Someone to just be with her on this cold Fall morning. She glanced at her watch seemly startled by the time. Apologetically she rose to leave, saying, "I reckon' I ought to git back to it..." and thanked me for my time.

As I collected my wizened thoughts about where to go with this woman, it occurred to me that we already went. Her needs were as simple as she seemed. Friendship more than anything. Perhaps someone to while away an hour in her old sensible shoes. But what struck me was her git. She had peppered that endearing word through most of her tale. How she had to git here or there, how she had gotten over her tragedies and even enjoyed the rare triumphs.

At first I was a bit melancholy and even a bit sad. But as I sat and thought,

my admiration swelled. Although she had come for help, it was she who had helped me today. Through her eyes I saw that in spite of life's challenges, it is our job to git through it the best we can. Not with bells and whistles, but simply doing the best with what we have. And even if it isn't all that we want it to be, we can git through.

So as I git to my next challenge and wonder how, I will remember that I just need to git over myself and my false needs. Challenges are what life brings. Our fulfillment and salvation comes from gittin' over, around, and through it. And if we can git along our path, we can git a long and blessed life.

So just git now, ya' hear? Life awaits—git on with it.

Sync-up

It never seems to work the way it should. I rarely even connect my phone to my PC because of it. The way it is supposed to work, or the way I want it to work is that it should combine the data, music, photos etc. on your phone with what's on your computer. Back in the day we had pictures in our wallets, tiny phone books, and a Walkman. But everything is supposed to be simpler in the digital age. Just plug in and sync.

But without fail, it seems that one device always wants to erase the other or somehow use a voodoo theory of data management. Random things disappear and reappear. Things I deleted months or years ago magically show up—and the numbers I called yesterday? Poof. Once it must have hiccupped and my contacts list synced three times and I had duplicates of everything—except the number that I wanted. The music syncs might be the worst. All too often I get only every other chapter of an audio book, or half a playlist. Kind of leaves you wanting the rest. And don't get me started talking about the 37 app updates either. Everything just get all messed up and it takes me forever to sort it out. At the end though, everything is there: just completely discombobulated.

My clients often tell me they feel out of sync with their world. They say everything is messed up. They are not sure how they got there or how to get where they want to be. Sometimes they are not even sure where they are. Things seem to be working fine and then they plug into their thoughts and emotions and everything becomes overwhelming. That overwhelm can lead to emotional paralysis or desperation.

In order for us to be happy we have to sync with our world. The three

spheres of engagement seem to be mind, body, and spirit. Of course we know what the body part is. It is our physical shell that interacts with the world. It provides sensory input, pleasure, pain and all the other physical things in our world. In some ways, it is the physiological leader of the pack. It provides self-protection through flight, fight, or other instinctual mechanics. Without taking care of it, it will take control and shut down the other two.

And then there's this ethereal thing called the mind. Although libraries have been written about the mind, for my purposes I'll define it as thoughts. Positive, negative, confused or clear, our thoughts define who we are; at least to ourselves. Individual and creative, it is what we think of as "us." In many ways we are what we think. Negative gets you more negative and positive produces happiness.

The third is more problematic. Spirit can be defined by faith but I think it goes beyond that. It is our life force, our energy. It's that feeling that transcends the physical to a place of well-being. Perhaps it is best thought of as our core. Values, morals, our sense of self and other, bedrock foundations. It's how we filter the world. Our own personal lens.

In order to produce lasting change, we need to sync all three of these aspects. Although getting one aligned may seem like progress, without the other two in sync the change won't last. Or something else unexpected will show up. Thoughts without action rarely produce results. Likewise, actions without thoughts can be hurtful. And if neither sync with our core, our spirit languishes: we will continue to feel unhappy and unfulfilled.

Think of any challenge you might face and you will find things in each sphere of mind, body, and spirit to focus on. If you look at your life's challenges through this lens you get a much broader perspective for change. Positive thoughts, actions towards a goal, and being in touch with who you are will result in actualization.

The key is to plug it in and sort it out. It takes some work, but all the information is in there, even if it is just discombobulated. Look to each area for what you can do to achieve. The duplicates, the extraneous, and the confused can hit the trash bin with a few clicks. Focus on the goal from all three perspectives. You will find you have everything you need. You are way more amazing than any digital device. No cable required.

86,400

"Well I think you're right," she said. The symbolic light bulb went off in her mind and she got it. One of those magical moments where the thoughts aligned with a new reality and *bazinga*, understanding. Well kind of. It wasn't really where I was going but an insight nonetheless. She smiled wryly and did quick survey of the landscape. The smile faded as she saw all kinds of dusty things in the corners, a few spills, and some unknown blob near the center. There were many scary things lurking. And faster than the speed of light she leaped back into the safety of shadows. She rejected the new reality almost before the light reached through the cracks. But for a moment, she stood in the light.

When I ask people about their challenges, they fill the minutes with a long trail of tears. Things that have gone wrong, bad things that have happened, and every insult ever felt. They fill many shadows with blobs of anger, disappointment and sadness. Dusty old hurts, spilled tears, and monsters under their beds. It is almost as if they revel in their tragedies. They cower and wonder if they can find the right path in the dark

If I ask people about their triumphs, the list is short and sweet. A few life events, a fond memory or three, and they trail into silence. They seem to barely glimpse the landscape of happy. As we talk about where they want to go, they are equally lost. They know they want different but different is almost as amorphous as the shadows and blobs. I ask them to envision what it would look like if their days were full of joy and their struggle on the fringes. Maybe yes but probably no. "Not today, not now, I just can't," seems to be their internal mantra.

Change can be hard and it can be hard to change. People seem to quickly reject the favorable possibilities as fast as they can think of them. Although their world is unhappy, there is a certain comfort in the known and familiar. They have been navigating around in darkness for so long they rarely stub toes. And it is just too hard to be any different. But what if it wasn't?

Most change does not arrive overnight or from an instant of insight. It is the end product of small steps—setbacks and successes—and then navigating some more. The dawn of happiness breaks gradually, moment by moment. And with each passing moment things become brighter, clearer, and more navigable. And although insight can lead to motivation, only action brings about change.

Every moment we linger in the darkness is another moment without light. Today, and every day, there are 86,400 minutes. How many minutes will you choose to be in darkness? How long will you be paralyzed by your fears? When you decide that the answer is not one moment more, your dawn is on the horizon.

Small cuts

It was my second one in as many hours. Not exactly a string of good luck. Neither was deep or big—they never are. And between them, I didn't even shed a quarter drop of blood. But the paper cuts hurt a lot anyway. It's not like I was doing something exotic, like counting new 100 bills. One was from a very dangerous coupon I had printed and the other from wrapping paper. Oh the horror. But every time I move my hand, it gives me a tinge of ouch. Not tear-falling owies but enough to mock me. Ha! Take that!

Paper cuts are kind of odd things. When you think of paper, you think of a million and one uses, from the ever-present list to love notes. The last thing you think of, if you think about it at all, is paper's danger. Sure, it's not emergency room kind of danger but I suspect that there are millions of them that happen every day. And although they don't really bleed, they hurt nonetheless.

Words are kind of similar. We all know that sometimes words can hurt, but we don't expect them. The cuss word family can make you bleed pretty easily. Racism, sexism, and pretty much any ism can cause emergency room-like hurt and anger. We know these hurts, recognize them, and can point to their dangers. But what of the other little micro-insults that merely hurt? That sideways glance, eye roll, or passive aggressive dig. Although we might say we aren't spewing any overt 'isms', our micro-behaviors say something else: rudeness, inconsiderateness, or misguided humor at someone else's expense. Seems this is the basis of a lot of humor—making fun of people. We never make jokes about black people anymore though, except our president, I guess. Them would be fightin' words. But blondes and the Polish are still fair game.

From the blatant to the unintended, words can hurt our fragile sense of self. And even the thickest skinned among us have our vulnerabilities. Although we may not shed a tear, or a drop of blood, it doesn't make us impervious to the hidden pain. When we least expect it, we can get cut. Ouch.

Of course, there may be no way to avoid saying hurtful words entirely, but it is important to self-reflect on your biases. Those immigrants of today were your great-grands of yesterday. Americans, and it seems that most other countries, have strong racist pasts. From the Apartheid of South Africa, to the anti-Semitic of the Germans, we have a long history of cutting deeply. Even our cherished Constitution was written for white, free men.

Know your biases. Remind yourself every day that in the eyes of God we are all created equal. Every person has the same intrinsic value, regardless of where they were born, what color their skin is, how much money they have, or their physical or cognitive abilities. All the same. Period.

Kindness matters.

Counting change

It was the Holidays so I didn't mind so much. I have some extra patience for the older folks that move a bit slower, even when they are in front of me in line. He fumbled in his man-bag, which was attached to his walker. At first he pulled out a wallet kind of thing and fumbled in that for a minute. Not finding the .37 cents he needed, he plunged back in. He mumbled some gypsy curses about how he always loses things. With a victorious "Ah-Ha!" he pulled out a handful of mostly pennies and meticulously counted them out as my 2-day beard turned into 3. He smiled at me and the cashier saying, "I am sure you appreciate exact change." I know I sure did, as well at the 37 people in line behind me now did.

I very rarely have any change, unless I just made a purchase. It just jingle-jangles with my keys and I forget I even have it. At the end of the day I have this candy dish I toss it all into for laundry or whatever. When it gets too full, I'll take it to the bank and cash it in. Being that I routinely steal all the big coins out of it, it usually doesn't amount to much. But a few bucks now and then helps.

People always tell me that they want to change. There are certain things about themself they don't like, they say. If only they could change, they would be more, better, different, they think. Usually though, it isn't an exact change they want, but a personality make-over. They want to be someone different than who they are. Although I always admire their motivation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to totally change who you are. Change is always hard. I often quip that the only one that likes change is a wet baby.

But like my candy dish, small changes eventually do add up. A nickel here, a rethink there, and change starts to happen. It takes a while for it to add up, but if you have enough of the small deposits, you'll eventually yield something worthwhile. The little things do count, even if you are old. Although a penny may not buy anything, a whole handful might be enough to make a difference.

Drop the ball

Less than 24 hours from now, our world will change. In fact, it will change so much that in less than an instant, every single person on the planet will notice. It is the night of couples, where everyone wants to be in the arms of the one they love. Date night all over the world. There will be headlines, photos, and merriment. Streamers, cheers and kisses, the world will celebrate adding one. The day we celebrate the New Year is here. Hip, hip!

For many years, more than I can count, I didn't celebrate the change... well not really. We would rarely go out. If we were lucky we'd stay awake and see the ball drop with Dick Clark. There were a few years that I set the alarm and creaked open my eyes for a moment. Yawn, happy New Zzzzz. Not exactly Mr. Excitement. New Year's parties are for the young I thought.

But what of this worldwide change? It is so important that everyone notices. Unlike secular holidays like Christmas, or national holidays like Thanksgiving... this is the real deal! The entire world gets to count down together... even the kindergarteners up way past their bedtimes will count. And in the end, three becomes four. Not exactly earth shattering.

But tomorrow is important. It is the day of resolutions and promise. This year is going to be different. There will be way more good things that happen than bad, right? Let's forget the past and move on. Tragedies, triumphs and old acquaintances be all forgotten, never to be brought to mind. Out with the old, in with the new. It's time!

Wait, isn't that the way we should live every day? Let today's triumphs

and tragedies be past and we start anew every day? Can you even imagine the entire world cleansing and renewing every day? We certainly wouldn't have anything to fight about. Let bygones be bygones between countries, people, and even within ourselves. Now that would be something worth celebrating!

The catchy Scottish ditty by Robert Burns that we all hum after the first few words translates well... "For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne, we'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne." Toast the past and look to the future. Seize the hands of time and make the moments count. Count down to the new world, the new thoughts and the new you. Tonight, and every night, the world holds its promise out to you. Count down to the one change. 5,4,3,2, 1.... happy new you!

Now that's what I call dropping the ball!

Just

It was almost empty. Really, no reason to save it. I had savored each bite, and almost without thinking I had eaten way too many of them. Surely not good for the waistline. Of course, it was full just a few minutes ago but that's easy to rationalize. After all, I was still hungry and there wasn't much more left to eat… I might as well try to empty the cupboards for things that won't last while I am gone. It was just one more, so why not. What harm can there be?

We often try and try to explain or minimize our behaviors through justification. We feel we deserve something and convince ourselves it's the right course of action. Somehow, adding the modifier "just" makes it okay. I was just trying to... It's just one more…as if that makes it okay. Usually, we do this after we have already indulged in something that probably wasn't good for us anyway, like that bag of chips or other careless behaviors. We think, *if only if I had known, I would have just...* But usually we do know and just chose differently.

That is, until we have to face the implications of the "just." Then, in spite of all of the rationalizations we can muster, "just" isn't good enough and our justifications ring hollow. The cold reality of our actions has consequences. It's what happens when we add "ice" after "just" and we have to face our challenged values.

Being willing to live spontaneously, in the moment, is critical to healthy fulfillment and happiness. But with each choice, there are consequences, both good and bad. If we think, at least a little carefully, before we do something we might have to justify later, we might make better decisions.

At least, just once.

Traction

It really wasn't much of a hill. Most days you wouldn't even notice it. But several attempts failed to reach the tiny summit. I'm usually pretty good at these things and rarely get stuck: must be all of those years of navigating through Michigan storms. I carefully massaged the gearbox with echoes of backseat advice. But we just sat there making our own ice as the tires spun helplessly. I even backed up a little, still spinning. We went left and right, but up was not happening.

Sometimes the easy becomes hard. Things that we take for granted without even a thought present unexpected challenges. We use all of our skills, maybe even accept some advice, and it still just doesn't work. We end up spinning our wheels in an icy attempt to achieve a simple goal.

What it takes is a new approach. We need to examine the easy and look for a different way up the hill. Usually, we have the skills to spin up, if we just look at things a bit differently. When you get stuck, take a few minutes to rethink the solution. Sometimes the best way can be found from your lessons in the past. And sometimes we may even have to ask for help. Although the slope maybe a bit slippery, no matter how you approach it, you already have within you all that you need to achieve your goal.

I ended up turning around and headed back the way we came. With a little momentum, I was easily able to crest the summit from the new approach. Problem solved, and I've reached the crest.

Doubts

He used the sentence like a period. Actually, it wasn't even a full sentence, just two words. No matter what I said, it seemed to be the salesman's stock response. I began to wonder if that's the only phrase he knew. It seemed to cover his discomfort with what he was talking about and perhaps trying, and failing, to exude confidence. It made him look pretty foolish to my mind. And the more he said "No doubt," the more I had.

We all have self-talk that we rely on to get us through situations. A default chatter that fills in the blank spaces when we're with others. Or our deeper inner voice, which guides our thoughts and actions. For some, this voice is filled with angst and self-doubt. The woulda, coulda, shouldas echo in our mind like a ping pong game. Oftentimes it has the tone of our mentors, parents, or even scripture. When we hear it, we second-guess our every thought and action. We give away our power to guilt, and end up with nothing but doubts and regrets.

Our thoughts do drive our behavior. As a therapist, I try to get in and break that self-defeating echo for my clients. Often I find that getting there is obscured by multiple layers of rationalizations, as we do and say things that just don't fit with our true character.

We can change this voice if we take the time to examine what it is protecting. Usually, it is fear of rejection or a threat to our sense of self-worth. With practice, we can replace it with affirmations that are more positive than negative. Will this eliminate all self-doubt? No, but it at least needs equal airtime on the sales floor.

Undone

Well, the Mayans were wrong. 12.21 passed without a bump. So did 12.12.12 @ 12:12. An asteroid just missed us back on the 19th that surely would have destroyed the earth. I see that 2013 will be the first year that doesn't have a double digit since 1987. Another forecast of destruction. Fire-breathing ministers are always preaching that hell and damnation are right around the corner. Of course, we are all going to fall off the cliff tomorrow, like lemmings, since our politicians can't stop fighting about ideology. Everybody wants to shift blame and responsibility to someone else. I look at my cigar tin and see that I too am going to die a painful death if I keep smoking. Seems everywhere I look, someone or something predicts an early demise if we don't do something different. I always hear echoes of Tim McGraw singing "Live like you are dying."

As we count the years differently tomorrow, we think about what we have left undone. The 'shouldas' turn into resolutions for changing our personal approach to the world. January 1 is always supposed to mark the day of doing things different. Lose weight, stop some bad habit, or start doing something different. We'll promise ourselves most anything to be different than we are. But most resolutions fade as quickly as our human weaknesses take over.

Real motivation doesn't come from threats or dire warnings. The only thing that can change behavior is positive reinforcement. Punishment just teaches us to hate whatever or whoever is punishing us.

Yes, I will I make resolutions today—and tomorrow, and the day after that too. For truly, we should live every day like it is January 1st. And my

resolutions will be about how to live a better life. Will there be a list of things to stop? Sure, but there will be an equally long list of things to start. And If I fail, I will try again and again until I achieve them.

Each moment brings a new opportunity to be more, better, different. What is still left undone can be done. Better to fail in trying than to not try and surely fail. The promise of something better rather than more of the same. It is the challenge that is key to motivation.

Accept the challenge and move forward, unafraid of failure. Live today like you are going to live forever.

Pretzel logic

After ten classes, you'd think I'd be better at it. I suppose I am in some ways I am, but sometimes it just doesn't work so well. I was surrounded by twenty-somethings that all seem to have the knack at first try. For this old body, which was never a great physical specimen anyway, it was work. I twist, turn, and bend trying my best to conform to the Yogi's complicated instructions. But at least a few times a class I'd think, *you want me to put what, where*? Of course I try, and rarely collapse into a quivering mass but, I confess, at least a few times I have. Some of the harder poses seem to come relatively easy but some of the simple ones are not.

What seems to help, and perhaps it is the key, is core strength. It's a combination of focusing your intent and sending energy to the posture. I was trying to do a simple one-legged balance move, and just couldn't. Time and time again I tried and I would have to flail to keep from falling through the studio window. But I have learned that the core and focus are critical. When I am in the flow, breathing right, and focusing on core strength, the moves come easier. It is difficult to stay in the moment and not focusing on the stress and strain.

Often times we forget that our emotional core is truly what makes the difference in our lives. We focus on the extraneous and peripheral which make the easy stuff harder than it is. We create a list of priorities that seem critical to accomplish. We struggle to find balance, trying to accomplish all sorts of things that at the end of the day, probably won't mean all that much. You'll never say "I wish I spent more time working" when on your deathbed.

Nourishing the core is pretty simple, if you block out the distracting sparkles. Your faith strengthens your core to allow you to set your gaze on what is important. It's nourished by love, happiness and self-fulfillment. It's not about being the best but achieving your best. You may fall over a few times but returning to the here and now will give you the power to succeed.

Designing

I must have tried 100 different combinations. I needed to look just right, fit that elusive image of a professional without being a stuffed suit. First impressions are important. Change the shirt and take another look. Fuss with the tie colors and look again. Maybe a whole different outfit... let's try. No, that one doesn't work, nope, not that one either. The clothes pile grew, crumpled on the bed with disgust. Even when one part looked just perfect, the others didn't. Your clothes need to present you, your thoughts, and ideas, in a way to make you accessible, interesting, and show some degree of style.

Oftentimes we spend a lot of time focusing on that "special" look. We fuss and primp, trying to present that perfect image. We carefully select things that we think others like and will show off what we are trying to convey about ourselves. Professional, seductive, or just intentionally casual, there are seemingly an infinite number of possibilities to meet our goals. Somehow we believe that perfect top or tie will be that "killer" look that we are trying to achieve.

But lipstick on a pig doesn't change the pig's nature. You are still what you are no matter how you look. Of course the fashionistas may get a longer first look, but when you step in closer, their flaws are not so well hidden. Regardless of the design, it's what's inside that will make the difference. I have heard that clothes make the man but I disagree. The perfect outfit does not make you perfect.

Should you try and be beautiful? Absolutely! But pay as much attention to the inside as the out. Inner beauty will always shine through.

Slow burn

I got both of them at the same time and they looked identical. Although one would have done, I bought two. I was having some people over to my temporary home and wanted them to feel welcome. Somehow, a place feels a little homier with them. I lit them both at nearly the same time. One immediately flamed high and bright but the other just didn't want to light. Barely avoiding a burnt finger, the second one sputtered a bit, but a small flame stayed lit. As I prepared dinner, I glanced over. The first had a huge flame and had nearly hollowed its core. The other one was a leaky, lopsided Charlie Brown kind of thing, dripping all over the holder. It would flicker tall and then seemly almost drown in its own wax. When the guests had left the first was but a stub. Not exactly a long lasting candle, I thought. The other was still leaking along but had inches to go.

We are all born with the same potential. Each of our fires is lit by our passions and dreams. For some, greatness is achieved quickly, burning bright for the envious to see. Tall and proud they proclaim, "Look at me!" It's true, they appear grand and provide light but sometimes they burn out quickly. Others take a little while longer to get going, and even though they are messy, burn much longer.

Although the one was nearly perfect, in a short time its perfection was totally extinguished. The loving lopsided one was still working hard, still providing light and warmth. It may not have been as bright but its light was enduring.

Life is better experienced as a slow burn rather than a flaming torch. Savor each moment, even if it's messy, and you will surely be brighter than a few flashes of brilliance.

Patches

Most people would have just thrown them away. Just little bits of scraps from other projects. They were all kinds of textures, colors, and sizes. Just looking at them, you would think they were late for the trash. A few of them were larger than the others and you could imagine that they were left over from something grand, perhaps a ball gown or prom dress. Others were just a simple paisley or corduroy. The color pallet varied from a vibrant rainbow to bland. The textures didn't go together at all. Really, it was just a scrap pile. But visions of something better must have emerged in the quilter's eyes.

Sometimes it is very difficult, if not near impossible, to piece together solutions to challenges. We look at the pile of problems we face and just see the big messy scrap pile. And although each one may be easy to envision a solution for, in total it looks like there is no way to make anything work right. We think it's easier to just pitch the mess and start over.

But there is a lot to be said about working with the scraps you have. Each past accomplishment and challenge met provides valuable lessons for those that look. No matter how big or small, dark or bright, there are things that make up our character allowing us to face the new. The solutions might seem messy, but when you stand back, you can see the beauty in the diversity.

At the end of the day, the artist was able to assemble a beautiful patchwork quilt to provide warmth from the cold. From nothing but bits and pieces, something emerged to bring joy and happiness. It just takes patience, caring, and love to make your own quilt.

Drawn right

He really isn't good looking, not at all if you look closely. One of those faces that only a mother can love. His eyes are too big and have a kind of dumb look about them. And when he opened his mouth it was confirmed, he even has a bit of a lisp. His ears are huge and near flapped in the wind. He definitely needs dental work and a shave. He has zero fashion sense, wearing a hideous orange shirt and a strange green hat. He just kind of lumbers along and you almost are waiting for him to trip. If you saw him coming at you, you would definitely cross the street.

Often times we judge people all too quickly. We make assumptions about what and who they are based on the superficial. If they are not like us they must be at least weird, if not even psychotic.

But most of the time our assumptions are a little Goofy, the very character I'm describing. And yet we all love the immortal character drawn by the incredible Disney animators. He had none of the style of Mickey or the frustrated aspirations of Donald. He wasn't the cute of Dopey or even the loveable Pluto. He was just plain and simple Goofy.

Innocence is fragile and often broken by the weight of the burdens of living. But it is the simple things that serve to renew us: unwavering faith, love for all things—even the ungainly—and approaching each moment with joy. A life worth living.

We all need more Goofy in our lives.

Consistent to the core

Even though it is mine, and pretty consistent, it is a mess. It would be easy to copy. Sr. Shelia was never happy with my handwriting even though you are supposed to have a bit of flair. She assigned me a writing tutor—it didn't help. I do remember carefully copying and forming letters on countless worksheets though. I pretty much ignored the suggestions when I wasn't in her class. Good thing she didn't have a ruler. I always tell folks who can't read my handwriting that I was going to be a doctor, and that excuse seems to work. I signed my social security card when I was 15 and it really looks much the same as it is today.

We all have things that we are proud of. Each of us is known amongst our family and friends for something that we take great pride in. For many, it is a signature food dish. My deviled eggs, brownies, or fuzza fuzza is the best in the world, I'm told. Just ask someone what they are known for, and you'll get at least one or two things.

When you think about your emotional signature, what is at your core that you want to be known by? Is there one word that just resonates? For each of us there is a phrase, a word, or an ideal that represents who you are, or who you want to be.

Sign each day with who you are, even if it is a bit messy. If you are consistent within yourself, your signature will always be recognizable.

She's coming!

The parking lot was jammed and the aisles were even worse. Of course, everyone had the same idea. Buggys filled high with all sorts of things, most of which had little to do with the forecast. The people with the frozen food made me smile; maybe they were planning on grilling the microwave dinners. All of the batteries, flashlights and other critical stuff was long gone, the inventory scrounged by the hoarders at the first hint of the looming "Frankenstorm." It's supposed to pack quite a wallop, we're told.

Our priorities change quickly when we are threatened. Yesterday's urgencies are quickly forgotten as we hunker down waiting for a forecasted storm, with all eyes glued to the Weather Channel or WeatherWendy's tweets. Of course, we must take all kinds of steps to prepare. We not only have to look out for our families but ourselves. Who else is going to?

We all know life has its storms but many of us fail to prepare. We ignore the things that are critical to our survival but stock up on things that aren't. If you take inventory, do you have what you need to weather life's storms? Are your relationships in order? Do the people that you care about know it? If the storm were to take away cherished people or objects, what would sustain you through the darkness?

It is important to prepare, to make sure your priorities are in line with your long-term needs. The lemon cookies and 12-pack may see you through the moment, but unless you prepare for the long term, you'll still be hungry and thirsty in the end. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Where will you go when the rain comes?

Oh fudge

I definitely laughed out loud, although I really shouldn't have. She was a cute as a button. Curly blonde hair and petite, maybe 3 years old at the most. She had on the cutest little dress with a Christmas print, white tights, and bright, shiny Mary Jane shoes to complete the perfect picture. Her Dad, at the other end of her hand, was clearly a work-a-day type. Gnarled and whiskered, there were paint spatters flecking his plaid and blue jeans. As they walked into the black Friday store, Dad remarked, "Look at all the people!" And in a cute, tiny voice with a little-kid accent, the delicate princess exclaimed loudly, "No Shit!" My coffee almost exploded all over me as I guffawed. Red-faced and embarrassed the Dad bent closer to his daughter and gave her a loving reminder: "Now Chelsea, we don't say those bad words in public." I wondered if it was okay in private. With wide eyes she nodded, obviously confused and overwhelmed by the bustle of the store.

In the 70s, George Carlin made famous the seven words you can't say on TV. But really, if you ask anyone, there are way more than seven that we classify as expletives or bad words. When we are kids, we rejoice in their delicious sounds. From the "doo-doo head" and "poopy" of childhood, to the rude mother-degrading curses of teens, we continue to thrill at the obvious insults. It's not just an American thing; I have seen comedic dictionaries about how to curse in every language. We classify them as "bad" words. Never to be spoken, especially not in public.

Of course no words are really "bad." They are just sounds on our tongue or letters on a page. It is in the meaning and context that the moralistic value occurs. We can exclaim about abundant waste in a toilet but we better not tell someone they are full of it. It's all about the context. I have to re-train

my brain after my various military stints, where bad words are sprinkled throughout casual conversations. I once heard a Platoon Sargent use more than 14 of them in a single sentence. Worst part, is that I understood and agreed with what he said. I shook his confused hand in congratulations. Bad, bad, bad.

What I don't understand is why other, non-curse words *aren't* considered bad. They have negative connotations in *all* contexts: such as "hate," "unemployed," "divorce," "addiction," "kill," and millions of others that produce a visceral response in any setting. We don't use them in polite society either. I will avoid further examples but I am sure you can think of your own that are far worse than "doody-head."

As parents and polite adults, we teach our children and train ourselves to avoid using bad words. Even though the best of us occasionally drop an "f-bomb," most of us don't cuss like drunken merchant marines. We realize that as reserved and thoughtful adults there are better ways to express our emotions. Only the vulgar cuss—until you stub your toe in the middle of the night. And then that raw instinct forces us to damn something to the nether regions. I'm not holier-than-thou; I am just as likely to slip one in now and then. Especially the milder ones, like sh*t, damn, and hell. Somehow, "doo-doo happens," or "oh fudge " just doesn't cut it in all situations.

I have a proposal. Can we create a list of the seven words that we *must* say? Wouldn't it be just as important to teach our children those words? Positive rather than negative? Wouldn't it be amazing to see a dad stooping to teach his to child to say, "Holy love!"? My list of seven words we must say would be: *love, faith, caring, peace, giving, forgiveness* and *thanks*. I'm willing to bet we have just as many reasons to say them in public. Maybe they are prohibited too, since I rarely hear them.

Today, I am going to offer my seven every chance I get. I will fully express myself and let people know how I truly feel. No holds barred. If I offend,

so be it. I don't need a filter. I will pepper my conversation with them and shock people. Even when I stub my toe, I will offer thanks for having a toe to stub. OK, well, maybe after I cuss and fuss a bit.

Express yourself—it's healthy. Let it out already, Dagnabit!

Clean it up

It's a bad habit I have, one of many I suppose. The counter was littered with dirty glasses. Really no reason, it just takes a few minutes to take care of it. But assuming no one is coming over, I'll let them sit for at least a day. Since my dishwasher tends to eats them, I just do them by hand. Just the glasses get left mind you, never the dishes. All sorts of them. Right now there are four there, all from yesterday. A mug from the morning, a glass from lunch, a water glass, and an as yet unbroken wine glass. I always take care of the plates, pots, and pans 'cause they would be gross and you couldn't cook.

It really is pretty easy to be negative. Always some reason or excuse to complain. On any given day we complain about everything from the weather, to our spouses and our jobs. Always something that isn't just right. The armchair philosophers spend their days contemplating whether the glass is half-full or half-empty. Based on how we answer, it is supposed to be indicative of our perspective.

But somehow we forget how grateful we should be to have a glass at all, let alone with something in it. Take a few moments to clean your glasses and see the potential in yourself. And whether half-full of goodness or with a little room for more, you are here to hold whatever comes your way with as much joy as possible.

The right stuff

I used to have a basement full of tools. Shelves, cabinets, drawers, boxes, and even some hanging from the ceiling. The basement was big and had lots of storage. Some were generic and multi-purpose, but others were for very specific things. Most of them weren't very good but had served some purpose at some time, and might again. It's funny how they accumulate. They expanded to the space allowed. I even ended up with several duplicates since sometimes I just couldn't find the one I wanted; it was just easier to get another one. At one point I thought I needed them all, and seemed to buy more every weekend. I used them all at least once I think. But since I moved, I have very few. Just a big handful. My box is so small that it doesn't even take up a whole cupboard. Just the basics. But really, every time I go for a tool, I find one that I can make work for the job.

We accumulate a lot of tools during our life. It seems that with each experience, challenge, or victory, we find lessons to store away. We fill every inch of our memory with what we have done, how we did it, and often, how we should have done it. When we are faced with something new, we rummage through our tool boxes looking for the right solution. If we are lucky, we can put our hands right on it. But for many of us, it is a bit messy in there and we forget what we even have. Although it is important to remember our life lessons, sometimes they can be paralyzing. We keep searching for a specific tool, hoping that we will find the answer. But really, most of the tools we truly need are pretty simple and don't cost anything. Kindness, gratitude, and patience will solve many of our daily challenges. Of course, faith, love and friendship should always be within reach to solve the rest.

Take time to simplify your life and you may find you have all the tools you need.

Hold it up

It's my least favorite body part, not that I frequently make lists of these things. Of course, most people wouldn't notice it, it's not like it's hideous or deformed. Mostly I don't think about it, unless I look in a mirror or someone takes a picture of me. It's the first thing to gain weight and the last to lose it. I really notice it most when I am trying on shirts; they never button at the neck. And when they do, they are hot and irritating. So even when the shirt does fit, I end up being uncomfortable.

But like every other body part, we need our necks. Jokes and metaphors about it are plentiful… Sticking it out, being a turtle, hot under the collar…It seems that for almost every emotion we have a neck analogy. I am not sure any other body part gets the same attention.

We all have parts of ourselves that we don't like. From the physical to the emotional, we are our own worst critics. We have a hundred reasons to justify our negative thoughts. We get lost in the quest for perfection and continually measure ourselves against the ideal. Sure enough, it seems like that part never fits the ideal, regardless of whether it should or not.

It is important to accept ourselves for who and what we are. Of course we should work on our self-perceived flaws to achieve a greater fulfillment. But first we have to be comfortable with our strengths and accept who we are. Our strengths typically far outweigh our flaws. Once we accept who we are, we can begin our quest. So for now, I'll just stay unbuttoned and avoid the mirror. I won't stick my neck out, or pull it in; I'll just let it hold up my head. And today it will hold my sights a little higher.

Oh mom

She does talk to us every day, but many of us don't listen. Mostly we just take her for granted and ignore her. Although she's not tranquil or vengeful in and of herself, we like to perceive that she is. But she is more physically and emotionally life-sustaining than anything else. She has tremendous power over our lives. Her tears are silent but if you listen, you can hear her sadness at our hands. She selflessly continues, nonetheless. Birth and joy are what she does best: her beauty and wonder fill our hearts and minds even on our saddest days. There are few things that can take our breath away in the same way. And we say thanks by our ignorance and exploitation. Although we don't actually know her birth date, we celebrate it today. Sure there will be some celebrations, but most people will barely give it a thought. If it was your mother, you'd be sure to get a harangue for this omission. And yet she is the mother of us all. And really the only one we have.

Today we celebrate Earth day. There will be few parades, cakes, or even presents to unwrap. But without her life-sustaining presence our worlds could not exist. She is here to serve us, and like our Moms, does so largely without complaining. But we would never exploit our Moms like we do her. Most of us can't impact global warming, strip mining, cancer, or a world of other challenges. But we can still make a difference by how we live each day.

Take a few moments to pick up a few extra pieces of trash today, or even plant something yummy to grow in your organic garden. Reduce, reuse, or recycle something. The list of ways we can appreciate her and make a difference could be pages long, but will never get done unless everybody does something. You'll be glad you did. And by the way, you should always listen to your Mom!

Simple strength

I am not sure why they were giving them out—it didn't have any meaning to me, or relevance to their product. But people were scrambling and grabbing them up as soon as they hit the table. I picked one up off the ground. Curious. Starbucks was giving them out to the runners, but the connection wasn't obvious, nor did it have their logo on it. Curiouser and curiouser. It was just a thick piece of interwoven, hairy twine-like rope, wound into a bracelet. Probably pretty prickly to wear. And held together only with simple sticky tape. Clearly its strength was in the twisted twine strands. Hundreds of little fragile hairs woven and twisted together. Individually they're pretty weak and easily broken. But together they became a bracelet. I held the rescued one out to a scrambler and they nodded quick thanks.

None of us have a perfectly woven life. From royals to waifs, we have all endured many fearful and tear-provoking threads. Each one feels the same or worse than the one before. Sometimes it's hard to see how they are connected or that we can become strong from them. But our character is intertwined with many fine strands. Individually the stands may be kind of scratchy, imperfect, and not able to endure much, but together they make up the sturdy circle of who we are.

Of course, we can't always be strong. Like the sticky tape holding it, we all have our weak spots and breaking points. That's what makes us human. But it is the simple things that help keep us together. Family, friends, grace and love are all part of that sticky stuff that keeps our circle of strength strong.

In your weak moments, look for strength in the simple. It can help pick you up off the ground and get you running again.

Toddler lessons

It happened twice this week and brought back all kinds of memories from the past few years. The kids were on the playground of the Child Development Center as I was walking by. The usual laughs, outbursts, and bustle echoed. Over the din I heard one child scream, "I don't like that!" It's one of the things we used to teach the kids to say when someone was annoying them or pushing their buttons. We tell them, "Use your words," and this child certainly did that. A good coping technique, although we didn't encourage the ear-piercing decibel level.

In the drop-in center, the two barely toddlers were together and of course, one wanted what the other one was playing with and tried to just take it. You can predict that the victim cried and hit the other one. The teacher appropriately intervened with the stock response: "No, soft touches, soft touches," which is the mantra in the toddler room. "We don't hit our friends," followed by, "We have to share." In a few moments it was over. Good lesson and teacher!

Can you imagine a world though where every time someone did something we didn't like we could scream, "I don't like it?" Imagine sitting in the hallway of your office building; you'd probably go deaf… Life isn't fair and there are so many things we don't like. But we can't always get what we want when we want it. And screaming really isn't a good solution. We all want to lash out, strike back, and get even when things don't meet our expectations. We have to figure out a way to use our words to convey our thoughts and feelings in such a way that they don't hurt. But we also must find an effective way to cope with those feelings of anger and emotion that just happen when things don't go as we want.

I think the solution comes from the toddlers. Soft touches are the key. If we take the time to think a bit about how we want to be understood, we can use the soft touches of thought and emotion to express ourselves. We really should try not to hit our friends—physically or emotionally. Effective and caring communication requires non-hurtful listening, sharing, and patience. In the end, we can take turns and both enjoy what the world has to offer.

And if you can't get what you want when you want it, get over it. There are other toys to play with.

Get carded

Every place I worked, I would get new ones. If I had kept one of each business card, I could have probably wallpapered. Even though they all they were all the same, they were different. Each was unique in color, photos, and design. But at their core, the function remains the same: to proclaim, to the lucky receiver, who you are and what you do, in tiny 6-point font. Yup, in 3.5 x 2 inches, you're supposed to say everything someone needs to know. Most face-to-face interactions in business begin or end with one, at least initially. After you have known someone for a while you are supposed to remember all of their critical stuff.

How often we spend our time trying to figure out people. What makes them tick, why they would act that way, or say something like that. We receive all kinds of messages, most of the time mixed, about what they are trying to convey about themselves or what they are trying to communicate.

How simple life would be if we could just include our core information on a little piece of stiff paper. We could walk up to someone and hand them a card with our core information. Not what it is we do to make money but what we are all about. Simple messages that convey our values and character. Just reach into your pocket and pass it out. It certainly would cut down on the guessing and confusion.

What would your card say? Would its face be covered in 6-point font of all the things you think you are? Barely readable but comprehensive? Would it include your life roles, such as husband, wife, father or mother? Would it show an important value or quality—like optimistic, or "I believe?" Perhaps it would show your wishes or dreams. The possibilities are

seemingly endless. But of course, the more you cram on there the more it gets confusing.

I know what mine would say. Clean and simple, with no flowery distractions. Simple black and white type, with the largest font that would fit. It would encompass everything I am and that I value. Five words would say it all.

With apologies to Descartes, it would simply say: *I care, therefore I am.* What's in your pocket?

Just enough stuff

I have been filling them up for days. Anxious worry about whether I will have enough... will it all fit. Overstuffed and a bit bulging, I know they are heavy but very sturdy. Some hold the fragile stuff, bigger ones for light stuff—all shapes and sizes to get it just right. Surrounded and piled high—where did all this junk come from? When I arrived here less than two years ago I had whatever fit into the car. Now I need a truck. I did recycle a few things as I have been packing but most of it seems I still need. Perhaps. Tape up another one and move on, I think. No time to dally.

Moving is not easy no matter what the circumstance. As we gather our emotional stuff to get to a different place, it's amazing to see how much stuff we really have. Stuff that you even forgot you own, or that owns you. We try to cram it all into boxes so it will be safe: we surely can't do without it, we think. Easier to pack it up and move it with you. Until you get to your new place and it doesn't fit any more.

Oh, the stuff we force ourselves to carry place to place. Thoughts, emotions, and junk that we accumulate so fast. All critical at the time and not so much when you have to move it. Trying to figure out how it will all fit together in the future is as exhausting as it is carrying it around. But without it, we feel like emotional paupers, impoverished and inexperienced in the world. We feel we need to carry these lessons so we don't get hurt again.

As I sit with my paper plate, plastic cup and fork I wonder, really, is all of this stuff that important? Would my life be less complete without it? I imagine how refreshing it would be getting to my new space and just starting fresh. No expectations, no stuff, just getting what I need as I need it. In fact,

I did almost sell all my furniture rather than moving it. But as tempting as it sounds, it is a lot of work to take care of your emotional needs. Without some of the stuff we accumulate, we would be continually seeking what we need with empty longing.

The key is to keep what you truly need close, and just leave the rest boxed up. If you need it, it's there, but why clutter up your new space with stuff that you don't need now? Reach for your lessons when you need them but don't allow them to them clutter your mind.

My fragile box will be the last to pack and I'll keep it with me during the move. Packed with love, faith, and grace, it really has all that I need. Friends, family and God will be right on the seat next to me as I drive to where I am going.

Pack carefully and remember where you have been and what you have. Keep the important stuff close and those you care about closer. The rest is might just be unnecessary anyway.

Your flag is still there

Closed tomorrow for the holiday, the sign read. One of the ten biggies, when most of the country stops and reflects. The short list of holidays is composed of a few birthdays, a couple of discovery days and other important events. We are supposed to stop our daily activities and reflect on them. One could argue that each one is the most important, from the birth of Christ, to celebrating freedom. But more than long weekends, our holidays help us to pause from our daily routines and breathe.

All of our holidays are really all about selfless sacrifice. From Jesus giving up his life for our sins, to our soldiers giving up theirs for our physical freedom, we pause to remember that many have gone before us to allow us to be all we can be. Where would we be today if Columbus or Dr. King hadn't taken chances? Or if workmen didn't stand up for their rights or Washington decided that it was too damn cold at Valley Forge?

So often we fail to enjoy the freedom that we have. Not the choice between burgers or beaches, but the choice to live our lives without our self-imposed woulda, coulda, shouldas, or even worse, the I can'ts. We close our minds and hearts to the freedom to feel happiness, joy, and love. We want to push that responsibility outward, as if the world is responsible for our happiness. Although we can be thankful to others for providing the opportunity, it is up to us exercise our freedom. Choices not taken are not really choices. Not only should we be grateful for their sacrifices, we should seize every moment and live life to the fullest. But it's more than sacrifice, it's achievement. It's what those that have gone before us held in their hearts for each of us.

So perhaps today you should declare your own personal independence day. The day when you say "no more will I suffer the burdens that I impose on myself." I will free myself from doubt, from oppression, from negativity. Today can be the first day to be all you can be. Raise your flag and let it unfurl in the wind. Your star-spangled banner is still there. Tell everyone: "Today, I am free."

And don't forget the fireworks!

The flow

The evening settled over the river sparkling with fading sun. A dull blue-gray monotone covered the sky in its sameness. The water flowed high, covering the foundations of the taupe millstones. Creating a thunderous roar at the noon, the waterfall flows churning the upriver debris into renewable life for the river. At low tide, dozens of black, jagged rocks jut out barriers to the rivers path. But now they lay silently submerged in an inky brown reflection. Almost noiselessly, the river carries its cleansing debris out to the bay without barrier at high tide. Silhouettes of the indistinct hover in shadows on the shore, the docks all but faded to a ghostly grey. The air laden with moisture cries for the storm that never came. Its dew dampens all that waits. Yet a faint, still breeze follows the flow providing relief from the day's heat. A lone sparkle pierces the evening above the horizon, twinkling its hope for the coming moonless night.

In the twilight we reflect on our days. What was, what should have been, and the relief that may not have come. The day's tears and sorrows are covered up and washed free in a calming cleanse. After the chaos of the day, we pause to think of what we were able to achieve. Soft sighs replace the shallow breaths as we think of what remains to be done. Tomorrow's tide will prove to be as thunderous as today's.

But in the cleansing breeze there is always a sparkle of hope on the horizon. Invisible in the thunderous heat of the day, it sparkles with the possibilities of the future. Although not as bright as the sun, it sheds its twinkling light onto our calming soul. Without its hope, the night would surely be much darker.

Taking time to reflect on each day's torrent allows us to free the debris of the not perfect. Letting it flow without the barriers allows us to cleanse and renew. Pause, reflect and let go. In this living tide we can find the inner peace we seek.

Power up

It couldn't be an alarm: I don't use one. I look at my clock anyway to see the time, and it's black—like the rest of the apartment. Beep, beep, beep. What an annoying dream. But I think I am awake... I lay there, eyes open, and confirm. Yup, I am awake. What is that infernal beeping? I reach for my phone and I forgot to plug it in. It's dark too. As my feet hit the floor it seems that the sound is further away. I look around puzzled. Slowly I realize that with the exception of the morning light, everything else is dark. Got it! Power failure.

As I lay back in bed my mind races to the worst. I sure hope the whole coast isn't out. I wonder if the electronic lock on the apartment locks us in or out? I wonder what I have to do today: my calendar is on my PC. No coffee. How can I write today? I'll light some candles—oh wait, they are all battery-powered. I don't even know where any matches are... Now where is that damn flashlight? I keep thinking of things that I want to do but they all seem to require power. It's getting hot and I feel a bit of sweat rising on my brow. We'll this sucks, I think.

It's odd how we forget how important power is—until we don't have any. So much of what we do every day requires us to be self-powered. Every day we need to accomplish much: jobs, chores, and a whole list of other things. But for those that have no energy, it is difficult if not impossible. When you think about the oppressed, the burdened or overwhelmed, it's their lack of power that feeds the cycle. I think that's what depression is all about. Helpless, hopeless, and no energy.

As I contemplated the suck, I strained and no longer heard the beeping.

Battery must have run out. A slight breeze was caressing my head—how nice I thought. I was starting to cool off. It was very pleasant. This isn't so bad. I could probably write on paper. What a concept! My schedule can wait, nothing important anyway. As the calmness settled into the simple, I imagined just doing nothing all day. As I opened my eyes I saw the fan was spinning and it was much brighter. The clock glowed, could it be that late? I must have fallen back asleep. Oh wait, the power is back on!

It's often the little things that help us to understand our darkness. When we embrace what is good, rather than focusing on the negative, the bad loses its power over us. We all face unexpected darkness, but things will get better and brighter. It may take a while to figure it out, but even the powerless have choices.

It's time to wake up.

Disco lives

Ok, so it's a bit weird... but not really. I would never ever not close the bathroom door if someone was here or I was out in public. No matter how urgent, and it usually is, modesty wins. And although guys have it much easier half the time, I am still not a fan of just finding a corner or a tree. But when I am home alone, I don't always shut the door. Usually I have waited a bit too long and the urgency beats privacy, even though there is no one to be private from. But yesterday I went to shut the door and it wouldn't go. The carpet just bunched up. I stuffed it back under and tried again. Still no luck. I had just washed it so maybe it was too fluffy. I did a bunch of my best disco moves, trying hard not to look in mirror, and mashed it all down again. I smiled a bit as Saturday Night Fever and Napoleon Dynamite flashed through my mind. It wasn't pretty, and neither was the rug formerly known as fluffy, but the door moved freely again.

If you ask most people, especially in the aftermath of the NSA scandal, privacy is very important. We go to great lengths to try and protect it, from gazillions of passwords, to whispered secrets; we don't want anyone to know our business. I guess we are all afraid of big brother or bad guys.

But sometimes we keep secrets private from ourselves. Whispered thoughts in the back of our mind, barely audible to anyone. Inadequacy, failings, or doomed dreams. They might be fluffy or flat, but we refuse to even give them voice. We think that just thinking about the unthinkable will surely be bad. We trap our thoughts behind closed doors in a jumbled mess.

There is a little kid's book that I used to see around in Child Development Centers. I loved the title: "Everybody Poops." Casual in its approach to

potty training, it attempted to normalize something that adults sometimes have trouble talking about. We all have lots of crap in our world—it's a given. But hiding it from yourself just results in anxiety, depression, and your plumbing backing up. It's important to be able to let that door be open sometimes, especially when you are alone. No one knows and no bad guys will attack you for your thoughts. They are just thoughts.

So take some time to express yourself to yourself. Give voice to the dark and it loses its power. Dance all over the things that don't quite work until they fit. If you can figure out when to leave the door open, and when to keep it closed, your emotional plumbing will continue to work just fine.

I'll be humming Staying Alive for the rest of the day... It's good advice from the Bee Gees.

How now

What came first? We know the question, but the answer? Not so much. Chickens and eggs are not important unless you're the Colonel or Easter Bunny. Of course, we know What's on second 'cause Who is on first, and we all want to be on first. Not only is it the prime goal of every Little Leaguer, it is the fantasy of every hormone-laden adolescent boy. We wax poetically over our first love, our first kiss, but not so much over our first wife or husband. But it is important to do first things first, right? I wonder if the first people know they were first, or were they just only? The First Lady knows she's first, but she doesn't even have to earn that. She just gets it by being hooked up with whatever knucklehead is currently in whatever first office. But when two of those knuckleheads are together, one is no longer first, just former. People get so intense about being first. No one ever cheers "We're number 2, we're number 2!", 'cause we all know it's about the gold medal, being the best among the best, standing on that podium in front of the adoring crowds. One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind. Who was the second guy on the moon? Oh wait, Who was still on first?

Of course, being first isn't always a good thing. Although my first computer was fun, now it's barely a good boat anchor. Or the first electronic anything, for that matter. What about your first flat tire... we probably all remember it but would rather forget it. I remember jostling to be first in line to see an attraction with the family. Got real close to the door, right under the eaves, to be blessed by a pigeon expressing his opinion with the remains of his breakfast. Of course we all know about what happened to the first mouse... Snap... and the second one deftly avoiding the body to get the cheese.

Somehow we confuse being the best with being first. We always want to compare and contrast our achievements with the Jones's across the way. We think about how lucky and rich some people are, like Steve Jobs or Neil Armstrong. But if we stop to think, there are so many things that had to happen for these guys to be the first. Lots of shoulders to stand on and people that helped. The "how" is just as important as the "who" and "what." And even though we will all remember Lance and A-Rod, now that we know they cheated, their being first is forgotten. And yet even though we can't remember Buzz Aldrin's second step, the mission would not have been completed without the entire team on the ground and in the capsule. Silvers and Bronzes are incredible achievements, and heck, just being in the top 12 at the Olympics is incredible. But What is always going to be on second, because we don't remember What.

So what is the point. Notice, no question mark at the end of the last sentence. What is, not what is? Depends on where you put the emphasis. If it isn't a question, it is an answer. "What is" is what we do to live our lives to the best of our ability. It's not about being first or even last, it is about how you live your life. Who may care about what others have, but just having anything is an amazing gift. There are so many without hope or happiness that would be grateful for whatever.

So stop comparing the whozies and whatzies. Give up the first spot and be happy with what you can do. Really, there can be only one first and one last and the rest of us are in the middle anyway. Be grateful for who you are—you're amazing. It not as important what you have but how you use it.

So my new goal is not to be first or last. It's to be brown cow-like—how unsexy is that? But how now is how we should be.

Moo've on over, let's get on with living.

When it is

It was a simple question to ask but a complex one to answer. "When will we be done?" she asked. Of course, she wasn't referring to the session, but asking in general. Being the skilled therapist that I am, I of course deflected the question and re-framed it to get her thoughts on it. But it is a question that we therapists get all the time.

If you think about it though, are we ever really done? Isn't there always something more to do or say? Yet another task, another exploration, or something else looming? And even when we are done with whatever, it doesn't mean that it will necessarily stay done. Kind of like filling up your gas tank, it can be done one day and a few days later needs to be done again. Many clients just drop out when they feel they are done, but usually it doesn't mean that they are. It just means that they are unable or unwilling to work any more.

When things are really done, we just know it. We don't need a pop-up timer or gas gauge to tell us. When we feel we have made enough progress, achieved some goals, or feel filled up we can get down the road a little further. But at some point, we will probably have to refuel again.

For many of life's challenges there is no end. Life is a process and most of it isn't about birth or death, but how you spend the time in the middle. It's the journey, not the destination.

OK, I am done with this... for now anyway.

Cracked up

From a delicate soufflé to pastels at Easter, what an amazing thing the egg is. If you stop and think about all the uses of the simple egg, it's mind-boggling. Besides producing cute little chicks, they can be used in so many ways. They can be mashed, separated, boiled, and fried—at a minimum. We can use them in everything from first-aid to shampoo.

But my thought today isn't about any one eggtastic thing; it's about all of them. In its simplest form, it is pure beauty. White or golden brown, it is just hard enough to protect the inside from getting out. When the time comes, it is just a little peck or three to free the newborn. But it also can still be amazingly complex. Ask any chef about eggs in cakes, or batter, or any of the other hundreds of things they go in. Adding them just right will produce a perfect result. Of course, there are a few dozen ways to hard boil them—and I suck at all of them. And even at their end, the shells are calcium rich compost. But all the uses do require one thing. The insides have to come out of the shell. If they get lucky, they might be a little chicken. But if not, they will rot and stink badly.

If you think of the better you, the one you want to be like, it too is kept inside. We protect our fragile sense of self, hoping that somehow we don't crack up. We think cracks are bad and strength is better. Frankly, we're a little chicken to be who we want to be. But without the cracks, we will never free the goodness inside and achieve our potential.

So the next time you feel weak, fragile, or a little cracked, remember the egg. Its beauty is in its potential, not its protection. If things are not what they are all cracked up to be, we can still achieve many, many things if we get out of our shell.

Defying silence

Dawn came without breaking. In silence, the sun rose, cresting the horizon wordlessly. Soft, dim light caressed the river flowing deep over the rocks. Mirrored glass smooth at the shore, barely a ripple lapping. A lone heron perched statuesque, hoping that breakfast would swim by. Rustleless leaves waved in the cool breeze, clinging to the last vestiges of summer. Muted colors hinted of their daytime exuberance, now subdued in their dimness. The boats at moor drifted to and fro, at the mercy of the current and the tide. Their sails furled wanting the unseen breeze that would dance them own the river. Summer fading to Fall's promise of winter. Days becoming shorter and sunshine more precious than diamonds and rubies. The silence echoed thoughtlessly in my mind, not a word needing to be spoken. Calm, gentle, and serene. And for just a moment, all was right with the world.

In the chaos of our lives we rarely stop long enough to listen to our calming silence. Hustle and bustle we run, always something or somewhere we are not. Lists and bills, kids and chaos, jobs waiting to be done. Rarely a moment to waste. If we stop, we will get further behind and have to run to catch up. Control the crazy and get through to the done. But each moment in still silence allows us to empty the chaos. Focusing on the silence, chasing the to-dos and ta-das away. Not thinking, just allowing the stress of the world to seep out in silence. More powerful than a hectic vacation, it is a moment of respite to let be what will be.

If we can find moments of still, we can lessen our daily burdens and allow the goodness to fill. Meditation, prayer, or just simple gratitude will fill the void with joy. Breathing out the stress and inhaling the serenity.

Life is good.

Indecision

Nancy Regan got it right, even though we all laughed at her seeming simplicity. Those two letters are always the safest, easiest way to go. Just saying "no" will keep you out of a world of trouble. Although it can be extremely difficult, at some point you do just have to say no. I will no longer do... fill in the blank. Of course it is a bit more complex—there are many things that drive behavior. Our pasts, our character, and happenstance all influence our decision-making process. Most of us have learned right from wrong, no matter how subjective, and know when we should say no, even if we don't.

Some would argue "yes" is far easier. Just agree and go along, get on with it. Say yes to that thing that may or may not be good for you. Get 'er done, as the cable guy says. It seems more risky though. You're agreeing to action versus inaction. No almost always means choice "D": none of the above. No always mean no.

And sometimes yes means no and no means yes. Yes to no more drinking and no I will do that. Kind of like positive and negative reinforcement. They both end up getting the same place but just take a different route.

Decisions can be hard; there is no doubt about it. But always saying yes, or always saying no, is never going to get you where you need to be. We all know many nay-sayers and yes-men. I think we can easily identify the Eeyore or brown nose. I think they are universally disliked.

Indecision, self-doubt, and fear of failure clouds our thinking. Sometimes we are so afraid of failing that we fail to decide and then we surely fail. All

we can do is to make the best decision based on the information we have, right or wrong. And sometime it will be either or both. Deliberation is a critical process that needs to cloud our mind. It's OK to be unsure but resolution requires action, positive or negative. If you choose not to choose you still have made a choice.

So yes or no isn't the right answer. It's about taking the best action that may be right for you, unafraid and accepting that, in spite of your best efforts, you may be wrong. But you may be right too.

We live in a world of imperfect choices. Some things may never be completely right or wrong. Decide to decide and move forward. If you take the world as it comes, hopefully you'll get it more right than wrong.

Say yes to no and no to yes and one of them is bound to be right, no? Just do it!

Getting better

It is my stomach. No wait, it's my ears... No, wrong again it's my head. All three I think. None of it feels particularly good this morning. Stuffed up, congested, and achy. If that's how the first 15 minutes feel, I imagine the day is going to be a slog. My first appointment is at 9 and my last at 7, and not much scheduled in the middle.

We've all been there. Sometimes our bodies just get yucky. People like to quip that it's because we don't take care of ourselves. I am sure you might be a little more vulnerable, but really, bugs just happen. And so does life. There are days when things just don't go well, in spite of your best intentions, and sometimes plans just don't work. Conversations are misunderstood, ill-conceived ideas executed, or just plain 'ole klutzy injuries. And on those days, the yuck list can be impressively long.

But we get choices. We can choose to let our day go to hell or our cold bug ruin it, or we can fight back. A handful of medicine cabinet solutions, apologies, or I love you's will make things a bit better, a bit brighter. It may not cure you but it will change your perspective or tummy ache. And in the end, it's about seizing control of our bodies and minds to make things better. Not perfect, but better.

And better is always better than worse. I will get better, or better at it.

Check-in

"I don't know how you do it," she said. "I just hate flying." It may have been the 5th time this week I heard that phrase. It's true air travel can be frustrating, annoying, and downright uncomfortable but hate is a strong word. Do I enjoy it? Well I am not sure anyone enjoys flying any more, if they ever did. People talk about the golden age of flight when men were men and women were stewardess. They talk about how everything was included, from meals to baggage. But they forget the tickets cost more in a smoke-filled cabin, the food still tasted like my flip-flops, and general safety was sketchy at best. I suspect the same people were saying they hated it then too.

Call me naïve, but I really don't get hate. We use the world regularly in conversation, from vegetables to personality characteristics. Seems there is a huge list of things we hate. But how can you equate Brussel sprouts to air travel? Of course, the hate list is probably a lot longer than the love list. Love is another word that people are just careless with. "I love my new socks," I heard someone say. Is that the same as loving your child? What if your kid loved Brussel sprouts? Maybe I don't get love either.

In some ways, love and hate are the same. They are both all-consuming, powerful, and direct our behavior. Physiologically, they look similar. Strong visceral responses to external stimuli. They even get confused, like in the defense mechanism of reaction formation, or like when we cry when we are happy and giggle at a funeral.

Even though they are similar, I don't think I want to hate anything. In fact, the only thing I hate is hate. I used to say I hated onions. Now I just say I

don't like them, or the positive re-frame, "I enjoy things without onions." If you think about anything you routinely say you "hate," you can do the same thing. Try it: it isn't that hard. If you look at the positives of the negatives, things seem to be a bit better. Do I hate flying? I enjoy being able to get to see people I care about faster. Security lines? I am glad to see that other people have holes in their socks.

If we stop hating, the only thing left would be love. Maybe we wouldn't get so confused. Acceptance of differences, tolerance and appreciation for all things will help you be a better you. So check in now and then with the things and people you love. Give them a seat in first class. Forget your hate baggage; it's too expensive to fly with anyway.

Now boarding for our flight to fulfillment—nonstop.

Kitchen Sink

Now you have everything

At my house, everybody used to help. But it seems it may be that way around the world. It is almost as much of a tradition as the meal itself. After hours of fussing in the kitchen and an equal amount of feasting, laughing, and desert-eating we all seemed to bond again around getting the remains cleaned up. The table had been so full; there was barely room for our plates. A dish for everything and everything delicious. But with all the anticipation and most of the food gone, the dishes were piled on every surface and overflowing. From fine china to burnt bean casserole, the debris was everywhere. You would have thought we fed the 7th Marines. We didn't have a dishwasher, we had five of them—and dryers too. Wrap, box, bag and put away the leftovers and scale the mountain of dishes. Scrape, soak, wash, rinse, dry and put away. It seemed endless. Although the work wasn't fun, we all laughed and smiled. And just as you thought the last one was done, a few more just appear. Everyone pitching in, almost dancing in the kitchen. Although it was hot and sweaty, we didn't mind... we were family.

As we plan and prepare for our challenges, we eagerly anticipate the feast. Each aspect of our lives adds to our banquet. Some good, some a little overdone, but all prepared with care. And in the moment, we forget about all the hard work that it took to get us there and the challenges that await. For some, that may be the holiday buffet in our homes. For others, the promise of eternal salvation. But either way, it takes work to get there. And there will always be dirty dishes from our feast.

When I think back of those long gone days it is not the dishes I remember. It's the joy of being together. What were leftover were not the scraps but

the love for each other. We got through that mountain somehow, and none the worse for it. Gathered around the kitchen sink, we washed ourselves of the other junk that remained. And we had piles and piles of potential in the clean.

Wash away what is done and move to your potential. Go ahead and use a new dish for each of your challenges—there is plenty of room on the table. It will fit. And when your day is done, take time to clean up and be grateful for those that have helped you enjoy your buffet. Our feast would have been nothing more than a sandwich without them. There is no such thing as leftover love. And without love, we would certainly starve.

Heaven may have an amazing buffet, but I sure hope that it has dirty dishes. Gather around and grab a cloth. Together, we can get it done. We can't have everything without the kitchen sink.

The quest

Another smile, another handshake, another life story. Moments and minutes of introductions, scrutiny, and posturing. How can I help or fit into this person's life space? How can I be helpful? I can do anything from stuffing folders to carrying boxes. I look for a sign of confusion, desperation or hope. An affirmation from a fellow seeker, traveler, or wanderer. I am but a stranger in a strange land looking for the familiar. Been there before, exciting and exhausting. How will I ever keep all of this straight?

What's odd about my journey is that it seems to be in continual transition. Moving from A to B to C and have even passed Z a few times. I woke up today wondering once again, where the heck am I? 4 beds, 3 landscapes and all modes of transportation in 5 days and plop, here I am. At least I think I am here—where else would I be?

And be is always where you are. Always somewhere or someplace to be, or not to be, which of course is the question. But what is the answer? Neither Hamlet nor I seem to have the answer. Being is living and living is what is required, so here I be!

Our journey to fulfillment is based on meeting our potential. To be the best at whatever we can be, to be whatever makes our hearts, minds and souls happy. And for that, my quest will never rest. Happiness is transient and there is always more to do. Will I continue to be happy, to be fulfilled or to be in love with life? I sure hope so. I want to be all I can be.

The immortal Sammy Davis Jr. said it best, *I got to be me*.

Forget the map

The couple was struggling to find the first attraction. They were both clutching their iPhones but without a signal, they were lost. You could see them gesticulating at each other, pointing in various directions and even a little annoyance with each other. It was kind of amusing to watch. The guy kept poking at his phone, willing the GPS to work. Not going to happen on top of the mountain. Clearly they each thought they were right. And the poor map was crumpled and worn, like they had been doing it all day. I went over to help and they both smiled and in a different language, argued their case. I think they were Italian. I was amused as the entire mapped area wasn't more than a mile square. If they just started walking around they would see everything. I shrugged not comprehending the language, pointed at the map and pointed to the landmark. "Ahhhh"they said, and I wasn't clear who had won. They crumpled the map back into the bag and set off, hand-in-hand, for the desired place. Map reading is a lost art.

With all of our PC's, Mac's, GPS, Google maps and MapQuest's, people can't seem to read maps any more. They get used to using technology for the quick fix. Push a few buttons and the route magically appears and a little voice tells them where to go. It's nice, as long as you've got a signal.

Sometimes we take things for granted. We just push a button or two and our little voice tells us where to go. It's lovely when life is that simple and we get to where we want to go easily. Until something doesn't work right and we get lost. As hard as we try to do what has always worked, we don't get the results we want. We are reluctant to try something new when the

old ways seemed to work just fine…until they don't. We get confused, frustrated, and even think about abandoning the map.

All we really need is a sense of direction. If we start down one path, it will be the right one, until it isn't. It's pretty easy to change. I know my GPS, aptly named "the B," is wrong on occasion. But the funny thing is, we don't need a map or a GPS to find our way. If you open your eyes and look up from the map, you might be able to see what's in front of you.

Nonetheless, it is important to learn how to read maps. Pay attention to the clues around you. Your friends, family and partner will usually let you know when something is wrong. Doesn't mean they are right but it might provide a landmark that will be useful. In the end, it doesn't matter who won or lost, just that you came up with a path that works. Forget the map; you'll still get there if you try.

Maybe I should sell relationship compasses?

Yay! Everyday

It was full of anticipation back then. Counting the days until you reached whatever magic you were waiting for. From the first day of school, to a birthday, to even your wedding day. Red X's on the calendar eagerly counting down. And then YAY! It was here. Full of joys, happys, sads or whatever the moments included. And then, in the next moment the red X's were meaningless and the moment was gone. Sometimes the afterglow was amazing, like your wedding night, and others were more like a deflated balloon. Still, sometimes even the painful hangover was full of great memories.

It is always amazingly fantabulous when we achieve our goals, even if they don't produce the results that we want. It is a sigh of relief, a small step for man, or just a simple smile. It is equally the same for the bad moments forever etched in our hearts. On either side, we give so much power to these moments. We allow them to reign over our thoughts with a yearning for a repeat or the soul-destroying vengeance. We define our lives by what has happened, good and bad, in the past. Pretty heavy burden since right or wrong, there remains no future in the past.

Each day will always be full of new possibilities. Some good, some bad, and most just in the mundane middle. But what is fantabulous, is that we do get some control over what will be. We can set and achieve goals, let go of anger and disappointment, and move through to the next moment. It is those moments that will bring the eagerness of the wide-eyed. And if the last moment didn't bring your heart's desire, there is always a new day and a new moment to anticipate.

If you look with eager anticipation at each day's dawn, you will find more happy than sad, more good than bad, and achieve that YAY! every day.

Three

Simple. Just enter the code in and you get the app of the week free! Who could believe it?—It was something that I even wanted. I log onto the free Wi-Fi and after 3 unsuccessful attempts, I get on. And 3 more attempts and I get into the app store. Lots of instructions and 3 more attempts, a password reset and... the code doesn't work. Nor the second time. But again on the third time, I am in, kind of. And... wait for it, 3 more tries to connect and 3 minutes to download and it's there! Three minutes a day and my life WILL be better, the app promises. It's brain training. Given that I lost my mind yesterday I need something, I thought. But after 21 minutes, my world still seems pretty much the same.

My mom always said that things happen in threes. I think perhaps she was right, but it depends on where you start counting. Three bad things always happen in a row. Yesterday was one of *those* days and no matter what I did, it didn't work right. I think I reset the three clocks a few times. So today should be a three good things day, right? Well I got the threes for sure but I don't think the app is really going to make my world any better.

But here's the thing; if I took those same three minutes to do something productive, it might significantly change my world. Perhaps say hi to three new people, apologize to three folks... or even take three minutes more in prayer. Yep, three things can make a difference.

So what are your three today?

Hinged

I understand it may be genetic. My mom told me my dad did the same thing: leave cupboard doors open. Including the room doors, my current place has 29. Some are always supposed to be closed, like the front/back doors or the cupboards when you're not in them. While others are typically open, like the ones to the bedrooms. It's kind of what they are there for, to provide some sort of physical barrier to what is on the inside or outside. Except when you leave them open and you're not supposed to. As I write, four of my kitchen cupboards are wide open. My cups are exposed for the entire world to see! And, don't look, but you can even see my toilet from here! My bed isn't made either. Better close those doors quick. The dishwasher one is hiding clean dishes beckoning me to put them away and the oven is hungry for something to cook. It's equally frustrating when you lock yourself out of whatever.

We all have things we like to hide behind closed doors. Things we have done, things that we maybe not so proud of, and closets full of mistakes. Sometimes it's work we need to do and other times just a Fibber McGee messy closet. But without the ability to compartmentalize, our worlds would be a bit overwhelming. Many people would not be able to even function. Imagine the world of a soldier, or any first responder, unable to close the door on trauma they experience. I certainly don't want to think of my personal hallway of horrors.

But of course, we also want to be open to new experiences. We need to be able to keep our doors open so we can let the good stuff in. The evening breeze feels wonderful. And all of my friends certainly can come in the front door. If we never open our outside doors, we will be forever stuck inside our own little world.

The key is to be able to take control of your world. Open what you need to open and close what needs to be closed. Today, I need to close the cupboards, make the bed, and clean the bath. And don't forget about the dishes. I have some things to get done but later I will open the door and run away for my daily adventure.

Wait, is that the doorbell? Maybe the dishes can wait...

Tangled

It was dark and I couldn't find my way out. Running so fast but all tangled in something. Heart racing, head throbbing. I wasn't scared per se, but frustrated. My legs felt like they were in mud. Definitely perspiring, but not dripping. Maybe I am in shape after all? I imagine cat-like reflexes and triple back flips that will release me from my bonds. Bruce Lee ha! Ninja-like I leap—and stumble to my now skinned knee. So much for that fantasy. And then a buzz. Just a faint one and I am back in my room. As a sense of calmness returned I reached for the sheets to roll over. A tangled, wadded mess. Even the mattress cover was off. I couldn't even find the edge and the pillows were nowhere to be found. Must have been some fight, I thought. I untangled and honed in on coffee. Good morning world.

1.3 seconds and normally the bed is made—not so much today. Usually, it's a good thing because I really don't like messy beds, or messy dreams for that matter. I rarely remember my dreams, if I even have any of the nighttime ones. How could I have gotten so tangled up last night? I search my mind for other dream fragments and they have been chased away by Folgers.

The stuff of dreams is how folks think I make my living. Listen carefully and extract the inner secrets of your soul. Repressed desires, secret fear, hatred, or other strong emotion that we just can't cope with. Freud's manifesto, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, remains a bestseller. Somehow we think the secrets that our mind holds are the key to fulfillment. Well, maybe not so much.

Insight into what drives our behavior is key to understanding ourselves. Dr. Freud believed that many of our internal conflicts were primitive. Raw

impulses that we needed to exert control over. Sex, selfishness, and egotism were interlaced with all of our actions. We had to look toward our better, or super-self, to control these self-destructive urges. Somehow this is all very romantic and helps us to shift responsibility for our actions to the uncontrollable. Again, maybe not so much.

Although I dreamed I was a powerful Ninja, I am no more a Ninja than the Michelin Tire Man. It was fun to imagine but really just so much fluff. Is there hidden meaning in my secret desire to be a Ninja? I did like David Carradine but really, Kung-Fu is not for me. Maybe more like Foo Young or Chop Suey. Still, there may be something there… pass the soy sauce please.

If we want to change we have to focus on the here-and-now. Understanding may inform the change but it takes more than learning how to use chopsticks to achieve your life goals. You can get tangled in your dreams and wrestle with your past, but in the morning you still have to face today. And today is the only thing that you can change.

So remake your bed, and get about the business of waking up. Today is the day that you can be a Ninja or a Michelin tire man, if you get your head out of the pillow.

Take that you old sheets!

Superman and Elvis did too

I felt like Elvis swiveling my hip into the slightly stuck front door; my hands were full in my superhuman feat of carrying 14 plastic grocery bags in from the car. Real men don't make two trips. As it swung in a bit too fast, I heard a satisfying "boing" and the door swung angrily back at me, knob into ribs. Ouch! Doorstop must have been loaded and waiting for the unsuspecting. Although it saved the wall from the hole-inserting doorknob, my ribs are a little offended from its anger. A softer rebound and a louder expletive and I was inside.

Of course, we all know all of the metaphors about doors and the future. One open, one shut, on the threshold, etcetera, etcetera... I confess that I have cheaply used them a few times. Yawn. But what about the lowly doorstop silently waiting for that flung door. No poems or prose written, it just sits there slightly screwed waiting for its opportunity to serve. I am sure that none even give it a second thought unless they have hound-dog hips and hit the door too hard.

But I am grateful for the doorstops in my world. Being a seeker and adventurer, I always fling open doors. Forget the timid peek, let's rock that door open and see what is on the other side. Screaming fans, adulation, love me tender? I am in! Well that is, until I go too hard or too fast and then it's nothing but heartbreak and bruised ribs.

Your doorstops are as important as your doors. They are there to stop you when you go too far and prevent you from doing too much damage. They serve to ground you when you go too fast and spring back with reality when you think you are Superman or Elvis. Yet, they don't inhibit your swinging

groove and are totally invisible when you are moving at the right speed. I am grateful to my mom, my family, and my faith for helping to slow me down when I go too fast. A little poke in the ribs reminds me that I am not Superman, just plain 'ole me.

For those that go too fast, the doors close as quickly as they open. Even though Superman could walk through walls, he typically just used the doors. If you take the time to carry the right load, you can open the door far enough to easily get through without hurting anyone or yourself.

Elvis has entered the building.

That time

It was just one bite, wasn't it? Well, maybe two. Distracted and munching, I didn't eat all of them, did I? But where did the rest of the pack go? I just opened it. Sure, settling might have occurred during shipping, or they use a way too big box to make it look like you're getting a lot. But even whatever they defined as full was now empty. But I wasn't full—that's what I get for eating junk anyway. I really should just have dinner.

How odd it seems that people think I am living the dream. How could you want any more from a job? Important, fulfilling work, glamorous travel, and happy-go-lucky—right? People tell me all the time they are envious. But as I often say, a hotel room is still a hotel room, not a home. Touring can be fun but being homeless is not. It's true; I am grateful for the work and enjoy it. But it always leaves me a bit hungry. Although I settle a bit, it seems there is always room for more. Maybe my box is too big. So although I enjoy every bite, it also helps to keep me a bit distracted. Until I wake up alone, again, in a strange place.

I keep thinking that this is "it." The fabled last rotation. Until I think about the challenges waiting at "home." I am grateful that jobs await me, but they still aren't where they need to be. I am comfortable in my new place, but still alone. Maybe Japan or Germany, I think. But the answers aren't in Asia or the EU, they are inside of me like the last cracker. At some point we have to give up the "fat and happy " and get back to work. Grind off your nose and make what needs to happen, happen. Get your hand out of the cracker box and start cooking again. Perhaps this time I can make a full meal that didn't come out of a box.

Although some settling may have occurred, it is time to fully settle down.

Real is better

Bright and shiny, the plant was in full bloom. In this California sun, most everything thrives as long as you give them water. But before I grabbed the watering can I noticed something out of place. It wasn't really moving at all in the soft breeze. I thought perhaps it was just very sturdy until I saw a bit of metal poking out of one of the leaves. I caressed its sharp edges and gave it a slight twist. It was dusty and stayed twisted. Fake! But it was so real looking it could almost have fooled Mother Nature. It looks so perfect; *I'd like to steal it*, I think.

At a quick glance, sometimes things can seem perfect. We see glistening ads for the latest desire, hand-holding couples and giggling children, and immediately make jealous assumptions about their world. We compare our perceptions to our own dramatic reality and think, "If only..." or, "I wish..."

Although we are attracted to perfection, most of us know it's too good to be true. The pessimists continue to look for flaws to validate their perceptions. I heard one of my colleagues quip about a perceived idyllic family the other day. He sarcastically indicated that they probably hated each other. *He* thought it was funny but I was saddened by the thought. So jaded.

Although we all may think we want perfect, perfect is no more real than my silk plant. In fact, most silk plants look fake. And even when they don't, they are still not real. Perhaps pretty to look at but static, inflexible with hidden sharp edges. They even collect dust since they can't even cleanse themselves.

Mother Nature created us to be able to grow and thrive. She provides us

with nurturing, water, and all the potential to be strong. Why waste that potential on not being genuine? In order to be real, we have to be able to sway in the breeze. Our flaws are real and what make us unique. The fake will always be found out. It's much better to be a bit wilted but able to sway with resilience. Real love helps us to grow and be strong.

Forget the perfect and be who you are. At the end of the day when dust goes to dust, you will have been happiest if you were true to yourself. A few spots, a little wilted, but as real as can be.

The real beauty is in being real.

Between the toes

The terrain was gravelly, rocky and jagged. My feet were a bit hot and sweaty from the climb. It was hard to walk at first. Although the ground was firm, it was a bit treacherous. One klutzy slip and I am sure I'd be leaking red stuff, again. I stumbled a few times but quickly regained my balance. No harm done. When the stone turned to beach fine sand that I came looking for, off came the shoes. I had wanted to walk barefooted up the mountain, nomad-like. Cool but warm; it almost felt like a day at the beach, without the ocean. At first it was amazing between the tootsies. How smart I was I thought: no shoes for me. Memories of frolicking in the sand at the ocean shore came flooding back. But the further I walked, the deeper the sand got. I had left my sneakers back a few hundred yards so getting them wasn't an easy option. Deeper and deeper, all the time getting little steeper and a bit harder to walk. It seemed that there were rocks buried in the sand, and now and then one would catch my foot. Tired and hot, I trudged back down to the shoes. With each step I felt a slight pinch. A quick look showed not only a blister, but a popped one. I limped back to the shoes and anxiously put them on. Ahhh, felt good again.

I had eagerly anticipated going back up this mountain. It was a true desert experience of blowing sand, interesting fauna, and a slightly challenging hike. It was too hot when I was there last time and I regretted not having tinkled my toes in the sand. On this, my last weekend here, I thought *why not?*

But as amazing as it was, it wasn't all that amazing. The sand never produced the surf and the lizards were just not the same as life preservers. How eagerly my expectations were crushed, and how fast they turned to dust and discomfort.

It is always important to manage your expectations. It seems that whenever I fail to do so, the expectations, in turn, fail me. The amazing was exactly what it was supposed to be but really, it wasn't all that amazing. The nomad's expectations were nothing but crushed rock and blistery.

As my shoes are once again tied tight, I eagerly anticipate a return home. Gone is the excitement of the desert to be replaced by the longing for home. Again I wonder if my wandering is done, or are their more dunes to climb. Perhaps I'll just keep my shoes on this time, to be ready for whatever terrain I find.

It's in there

"What's for dinner?" I carefully studied the screen's recipe: "a family classic," it said. There weren't that many ingredients. It really irks me when I have to have 27 1/2 things to make a simple recipe. It's especially hard on the road, when you have unknown stores and have nothing to start with. I jotted down the 7 or 8 things I needed, setting off in mouth-watering anticipation. This was going to be delicious! I did a quick peek in the fridge just to check its empty shelves for randomness. A few hot peppers, some old tomatoes, and not much else. But my mouth dried up as I began the quest. The store was packed, confusing, and a bit primitive. I missed my home grocery store. I found the first few ingredients right where they should logically be. Butter, milk, eggs—check, check, check! The rest were a scavenger hunt. They didn't have this or that; heck, they had never even heard of Italian spiced ham. As I perused the aisles, the recipe evolved with what I could find. I can use mushrooms instead. Deli ham will work instead of prosciutto. I guess I can use Co-jack cheese. Maybe I can toss in those peppers? Tomatoes on top? Sure, it will still be Quiché but really, the original recipe just didn't work.

Sometimes we think we have everything figured out. We carefully plan how things should work—systematically, orderly, and with the best of intentions. We plan each and every step in our minds and even make lists. Yep, "I can do that," we think. We jump in thinking it will be easy, but it is never so simple. Something, or many things, always seems to be missing. Our mouths dry out with disappointment.

But fulfillment and satisfaction can be in store for everyone. The ingredients are all there and not hard to find, especially in our home store. We

already have the basics—the capacity to love, to care, and to change. If we look a bit, there are many other things that can go into our satisfaction recipe. Our inspirations, passions, and accomplishments are all right there to be included. The key ingredients of faith, family, and friends are all easily within our reach.

So don't fuss if your recipe isn't precise or perfect. You have all the right stuff to start with. Toss in what you have, use good key ingredients, and give some thought to the other important things in your world. You may find that your world can be just as delicious as that dumb 'ole recipe anyway.

More than wine

I never ate many of them when I was growing up and I guess I still don't. I am not sure why since they are part of a healthy diet. We would eat other healthy things: meat, potatoes, rice and even the still despised beets. But we didn't eat much fruit. Although I may buy a random apple or pear these days, most of the time my grocery buggy is full of boxes, bags and processed stuff.

As I headed to the checkout, I noticed a big display of grapes piled high and glistening from the mist. I instantly tasted one; I sure hope no one was looking. Yummers! And they were on sale! They had been crazy expensive for weeks so I had stopped looking. I tossed a big bag into the cart. But as I scanned the cart, I realized that I already had a whole bunch of grapes: I had some trail mix with raisins, a small jar of grape jelly and a bottle of Cabernet. I sure was grape-full.

Many people come into my office in desperation. They are looking for help managing their thoughts, emotions, and challenges. But thinking about grapes can make a difference. It seems that no matter what their state, grapes find a way to be useful. They grow from a wizened old vine, often on a rocky hill. When they are at their peak they are their most fragile, delicious, but easily bruised. The best ones are harvested to enjoy just as they are. Some are dried in the blistering sun into raisins, and others are chopped senseless into jams. Some of the best grapes are crushed, stomped, and turned into a smooth, fragrant wine. No matter what, they all take a beating.

Life brings with it many challenges. When you are feeling yours weighing

on you, remember the lowly grape. No matter how you alter it, it still has value.

So don't let your world be fruitless. (Sorry, I couldn't help myself.) Pluck yourself up when you are down and make the best of what you have. Harvest your talents and become what you may. From raisins to fine wine, there is a purpose to everything. And don't forget to be grapeful for your potential.

And a tip for all you connoisseurs out there: red wine goes best with peanut butter and jelly.

Just a dash

Most of the time they just sit there, waiting to be called upon. Actually, until the other day, I wasn't sure I had used them since I moved in. They are pretty sturdy and just sit sentinel on my table waiting to be called into action. Tall, ebony, and a bit brassy: they are stylin'. Whenever I shake and grind I think how much better my soup tastes—a little salt shake and a twist or two of fresh pepper makes the chicken soup complete.

Sometimes life seems blah and sad. Things don't go or taste the way we want them to. But really most of life is just, well, life. Neither the best nor the worst, just the in-between. Although we always strive for that perfect taste when we are cooking, sometimes it is a bit more elusive in life.

As a chef and a therapist, I know that sometimes you can overthink things. You grab all sorts of spices and vices and toss them in, hoping to chase the bland away. But at the end of the recipe, it may not turn out how you thought it would. And the more you try to doctor it up, the worse it gets. You end up with a terrible concoction that no one will like. You really can't undo over-spiced.

The key is to keep it simple. Cooking with a few ingredients, and a little creativity, will usually make for a delicious meal. If you use fresh ingredients, their natural goodness will shine through. A little love, patience, and a careful balance will help you dish out the right stuff. If it needs a little tweak, a twist or two of your favorite spice will be enough to bring out the best. Just like a smile from a friend, a quick prayer, or a dash of love will help you bring out the best in you. And a pinch of stylin' doesn't hurt either.

Vroom

Well it's happened once again. Toss, turn, groan and fuss. A little more fluff here, pull in a little closer. Cold, no hot, no cold again—can't make up its mind. Or perhaps *you* can't, hence the problem to begin with. Like a switch, you're on. Wired, fired, and ready to go until you see the clock's mocking face. You fall back crushed into your mattress wondering what the thought or need was. A quick survey for sound—for trouble really. Did something or, gasp! someone, wake you up? Silence reassures your fears. Thirsty?—a little. Bathroom? It can wait. Must be those thoughts racing around the track again. As if on cue, the checkered flag drops and you're off to the races again. Boogity Boogity, let's go racin' Boys! Rubber burned, smoke and flames. Faster and faster, yellow flags and crashes. One, two, or even three hours and no sign of a pit stop. If you're lucky you'll run out of gas and fall back to sleep. But your engine might stay hot and restless.

It seems many of us have problems sleeping at night. The older we get the worse it gets. More than 40 % of us get less than 5 hours a night. When we were young, we would just collapse with blissful exhaustion. Now, even though we are exhausted, the bliss isn't always there. There always seems to be something on the racetrack revving its powerful engines. The middle of the night race seems to rarely end.

If you're not getting an average or 6-7 hours of sleep nightly you're not getting enough rest, and want to do something to shut off those engines. None of these tips are magic but some can help. Take some time and think about what you need to get done the next day—even write it down. Cross out the things that you have no control over and prioritize the rest. Set them aside

knowing that if they rev their engines in the middle of the night, they can just hold their horsepower on the page till the morning. Turn off all of your screens and do something to easily distract—light reading, meditation, or something calming. Maybe a cuppa chamomile or something warm to settle the tummy. No snacks—they will just gurgle away like a spurting engine. Take a few moments in gratitude, prayer, or reflection. With each breath let go of the exhaust and breathe in the refreshing air. Fill your lungs deeply with calmness. Exhale all of your worry. Remember a single moment in your world where you felt strong, powerful, and loved. Let that be the kiss on your forehead.

We spend so much time worrying about what needs not to be worried about. Of course our worlds are complex: life is complex. But without rest, we will never refresh and heal. Whatever it is, it will wait. A fresh tank of gas is just what you need to finish the race.

Flicker

I've checked and they usually cost way more than my thrift store budget. But I got lucky yesterday and found a new, pretty one at an estate sale. I really enjoy the glow candles give off. I much prefer real ones though. I was in a cathedral in Europe where they used battery candles and it just wasn't the same. Though pretty, somehow flicking a switch isn't the same as offering a prayer into the flicker of a flame.

Still, the battery ones work well: the best are on timers, set to go off the same time every day. I guess they are reminiscent of flickering fires of home and hearth that we crave, without the mess. But without someone to light the real candles, you would always be in the dark when you got home alone.

There are many things that make us happily flicker in our lives. From the contagious sparks of children's laughter to our first flames of romance, we treasure the moments that bring us that glow. Those moments provide light, warmth, passion, and a sense of belonging. They don't have to always be the best or brightest—just simple and clean. Whether a modern battery or an ancient prayer, they serve to light our footsteps in the dark. Every flame starts with a spark, every light with a simple click. The key is simply to find what lights up your life.

Intermittent

It stopped working. Again! Of course, who knows when or why it stopped; it just did. Apparently, I am in a dead zone without coverage or signal. I got this spiffy little device that is supposed to fix everything. But I seem to have lost the spiff. Of course, the first thing customer service assumes is that you're an idiot. You must have done something like swing it around like a Hoola Hoop into a puddle of acid while spewing gypsy curses. I clearly explained to her that it was only *after* it didn't work that I did that. Well, the cussing part anyway. But it still didn't sync. "I'm on-call for emergency service today so I need my phone," I say. "What if there is a crisis?" "I understand completely," she said, implying that basically, there is not a damn thing I can do about it.

I guess the stars have misaligned and perhaps I was in the wrong constellation. Perhaps a strategic piece of pigeon poo hit the cell tower? Unplug, push buttons, cuss some more. I was going to get them to replace the device last time but it finally seemed to be working okay. Until it didn't. I was on the upside of intermittent for months and now, just phrap in your face. Another call to customer service. They would be happy to have their support technician look into it further—sometime today. In the meantime, would two Campbells soup cans and a string be sufficient? Don't call us… we'll call you…

Isn't it odd when all of a sudden things drop out of sync? Things are going fine and everything is working well. A spring in your step and full service happiness. Until something goes wrong.

But that's the challenge of life. Things aren't always going to work the way

they should. What was perfect is no longer, and what is no longer seemed like it was perfect. Life is intermittently happy and sad. It's just the way it is. Perfect will always be elusive.

Of course as soon as I hung up and stopped cussing about my bad luck, it started working again. Either they did something, I did something, or the pigeon flew away. Perhaps next time I'll just wait awhile and see if the stars realign. In the meantime, I will just gratefully enjoy the connectedness that I have.

Welcome back

I hate waking up in the middle of the night. My eyes fly wide open as if someone had flicked a switch. In microseconds the sleepy darkness in my mind clears, revealing my waking thoughts racing around in the darkness.

What am else am I going to serve for Thanksgiving? I hope my daughter comes. My heart twists a bit to think not. *Turkey, maybe smashed, some beans. What time is my first appointment? I checked but will have to check again—maybe it's at 8 am, groan. Did I miss any urgent texts? Did the world explode—no, CNN will text me.*

So many thoughts on the treadmill screaming, "Look at me! No, over here!" All jumping up and down like Arnold Horshack in the shadows: welcome back. As I lie in the dark I remake my list of what needs to get done. I try to ignore the thoughts that can't sit in their chairs: "Sit down until I call upon you," I admonish. But they don't listen well. In fact, the list gets longer and longer. In the 32.7 seconds it took to make the 192-item list, I feel overwhelmed. But on second glance, the last 187 things have been on the list for a while. I'll turn to that page when I get there.

I put the list aside and roll over to look at the clock. Probably 2 or 2:30 a.m. I'll bet. I'm still not sleepy. Just at that moment the alarm goes off and scares the hell out of me. No way! I slept until 1 minute before the alarm? Another bucket list item checked off.

The mind is always working. Like a classrooms of unruly students waiting for their teacher. During the day, we are preoccupied with our daily challenges. The to-do list is always longer than the time we have to do. We get through the list as best we can.

But in the night, the sweathogs are unruly. They clamor for attention, each thinking they are the be-all and end-all. But they are not all that. They have something to say but they can wait. Although they may have flicked your switch on because of their noise, they are more rattle than hum. There are much more achievable goals in the front. The rest can settle down and wait they are called upon. Mr. Kotter taught us that the best teachers know how to settle things down and get things done.

So although they may have woken you up, it doesn't mean it's time to pay attention to their chaos. Acknowledge them, but don't follow their bad behavior with your own. All things in their own time. If we don't take control of our classroom, nothing is going to get done.

Most of our daily lesson plans are very achievable, if we can maintain a strategic focus. Do what you can, the best you can, and get to the tasks at hand. If you focus on what you can do, rather than what you can't, you will achieve success. Even in the middle of the night, darkness will always fade when the light comes on. Forget the rest and do your best.

Welcome Back.

Red carpet

It wasn't really a heated discussion, but it was kind of intense. I didn't know some of the movie stars they were talking about, and the others, well, I had a hard time imagining them in a starring role about one or another of their lives. But they were confident that Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock would be best to play them in the movie version of their life. Star-struck, it seems they thought their life story would certainly be a blockbuster. They compared films and you could almost see their vision of the star walking down the red carpet, thanking them for the opportunity for such an interesting and dramatic role.

And it got me thinking, am I a Bond kinda guy, or perhaps John Wayne? Hmmm, maybe less testosterone. Perhaps Richard Gere or George Clooney? Nah, I am not that devilishly handsome. Maybe witty, like Robin Williams? I decided I didn't like this game anymore. It was frustrating—none of them look like me anyway. No way was Hollywood going to find me, I thought. I screened movies in my mind, thinking about how someone or another reminded me of me. Every match seemed ill-fitting at best.

OK, so I admit, it was a little fun getting lost in La-La Land for a minute. Imagining the suave and debonair playing me on the big screen. Adoring fans swooning and critics raving about the plot. Such a life! And then the curtain crashed and I got the hook. The critics in my head trashed the movie and I got two thumbs down. The plot has too many twists and turns, people couldn't follow it. And that soundtrack? Dark and foreboding. Don't waste your money or wait for the DVD—as if there would be one. My footlights faded into mundane reality.

As I lamented my lack of glamour I thought perhaps they should cast an unknown. Someone with unfulfilled potential but who sparkles with promise. Someone who will follow the footlights without needing the spotlight. Someone who could learn most of the lines but still have endearing ad-libs. Someone unafraid to take risks or make a blooper reel. That's it! A star is born! And that star is me.

If you forget the spotlights and dance in the footlights, your path will always be lit. Keep your chin up and enunciate your truth as you walk down that red carpet. Be natural and willing to take some risks. Forget the drama and critics. Be who you are and who you need to be. The award you receive at the end of the show is everlasting. Life is a stage and you are the star.

Play yourself—it's who you were meant to be.

Simple math

Mrs. Pisani, my 5th grade math teacher, would not be pleased. She was always after me to work on my basic math skills. But how could I resist the spiffy calculator in the thrift store, for only a buck. This one was a real manly machine. Being addicted to bargains, I toyed with it. Of course, it's not like I have major math to do. I should have learned my basic facts earlier but I never had the time for practicing the times. I got the plus and minuses okay but the rest, eh, not so much. I furrowed my Einstein-like brow and poked at it. I used to know these cool equations where the results would spell out words if you held it upside down. But now, I just tried some simple stuff, like 2 + 2. The calculator said the answer was 2. I tried again; I *do* know the answer to this one, I thought. 2+2. The bright, shiny manly calculator said... 2. Maybe if I pushed harder? Nope. Back away slowly from the former bargain, now known as junk.

Ahhh, the wonders of modern technology! We have devices that are supposed to figure everything out for us. I remember my older brother got a calculator when they first became trendy for high school students. He "needed it" for school. We tried to fool it but it was always right. I remember sneaking into his room to play with it. Imagine that, sneaking around to play with a calculator. The true dawn of the video game age?

Even when you think you know the answer, sometimes things just don't add up. You carefully take all the facts and put them together in a simple equation. But if you're like me, and not so good at math, things don't always add up. But 2 plus 2 is always 4, right? Well it depends if there is a decimal in there: it could be .4. It could be -4 too. How about 22? Of course, if the

wrong person is pushing your buttons too hard, things rarely add up. So much for the facts.

Mrs. Pisani taught me something about life, even if she had to use a ruler on the back of my hand to get it through my thick skull. Always simplify before you do the work. If there is a way to extract the extraneous before you start thinking, your thoughts will be clearer. Look at the problem from the big picture—does the answer have to be perfect or can you guesstimate? Sometimes close enough counts. But when it doesn't, take time to reduce the problem to the lowest common denominators before you start figuring. And for goodness sake, don't let others push your buttons; it's your problem to solve. All of the advice in the world won't help you do something you don't want to do in your heart.

So before you get lost in the math, ask what is the basic problem. Will it help me/them to feel better? To love more? Are the risks of getting the wrong answer too high or can I just try anyway? Even manly men get stuck. If you simplify first, sometimes the answer is clear. You may not get it right but you'll feel a lot better about the wrong. It's about showing your work. At the end of the day, you need to be happiest with you. I think it's called heart math.

When things don't add up, simplify: start with the fundamentals. Do unto others, be kind, love more and hate less. Share, pray and be grateful. Be honest and true to yourself. The world isn't perfect and neither are you. Pretty simple to add up. No calculator required.

meDevice

Well, I needed one for working out because in my mind I am going to be a workout champion again. I am pretty amazing in my mind; it's the real world that gets in the way sometimes. But I have been using my iPhone for music. Set up a playlist and import it into my idevice. Sounds simple, right? Well, iTunes hates me. It seems that I have so many devices that try to sync in their music, that I can never find the right songs in the library. Although the playlists are there, there is no music in them. So often I set up a new playlist to groove to, and it works for a bit, until I plug it in again and end up with Disco Fever, again. Polyester lives.

Plato once said, "Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life." It has the power to inspire, relax and fill your heart with melancholy. For many of us, our lives have a soundtrack. Steve Jobs understood that. He gave us a way to take that ghetto blaster off our shoulder and make our music personal. The earbuds are always in and we're filling our moments with what gives wind to our wings. That is, unless you're like me and your playlists are empty. The only sound in frustration is colorful expletives that don't keep the treadmill running.

We forget that we all have our own special music. We think we have to sync other people's music into our own "meDevice" to keep things going. Our parents, our friends, bosses and colleagues all have their soundtracks that they want on our device. Most of them telling us how we should play with the rest of the world. And we play those tracks every day. Sadly, sometimes they are the winds against our wings that bring us down.

So I have given up on iTunes. Now I just drag and drop my own music onto

my meDevice. The music always works. It can match or change my mood since I am in full control. But really, we are all always in full control—we just forget to listen to own music and hearts. Although many influence our playlists, it is up to us what we listen to. It is being in tune with our own music that will help us to keep our own beat. And when we are in our music we can understand that life can be a symphony. You can't beat that. Make your own music and listen to your heart. No playlist required.

The scoop

"Give it to me straight Doc, what's the scoop?" he said. He had spent nearly an hour telling me about all of his challenges and was waiting on the edge of his seat for a proclamation. He's convinced that all of his problems of the past few years were the result of some medical or psychiatric condition that made him do what he did. But the scoop was... maybe some anxiety, but nothing major. No diagnosis and no prescription. He was crushed—he wanted an excuse for his behavior. But the straight scoop is just that, and he sulked out of my office.

Usually scoops are terrific. We use them in the penny candy store to fill up our bag of treats. Cub reporters dream of scooping the word on the latest breaking news. We get our ice cream in scoops—two please, chocolate chip. Of course, we all like scooping up bargains. When we usually ask about the scoop, we want people to dish out the latest gossip. We have to get the inside scoop. Of course, that's different than the outside scoop we chase our dogs around with, but even 'pooper scooper' is kinda cute. I even used to know a guy whose nickname was Scoop.

"So what *is* the scoop, "I thought, as I listened to his heels snapping down the hallway. So often we are afraid to take responsibility for who we are—someone or something else must be at fault. And most of the time we are half-right! I thought about shouting that down the hallway—"Wait, you're right! It is someone's fault. Yours!" The inside scoop is that we are human and we make mistakes—lots of them. But in order to change we have to both acknowledge and accept those mistakes: scoop the poop, if you will. We always have to clean up after ourselves.

For most of us, there isn't a single mistake or a single scoop that is going to make a difference. You may get that "aha" on occasion, but really, we are more than an accumulation of triumphs and tragedies. In order for us to get to a full scoop of happiness, we have to get rid of the rest of the crap. That's the real inside scoop. When we learn acceptance and forgiveness, we are given an exclusive to move on.

Bundle up

Even a magic hat wouldn't persuade Frosty the Snowman to sing and dance in this weather. Twenty or more states have had significant snowfall in the past two days. I wish my thermometer was illiterate 'cause it reads -8 right now. The weather wags have been forecasting snowzilla for days—you would think this was the beginning of the next ice age. From states of emergency to preemptive school closings, the U.S. braced for the cold. News flash: it's winter and it snows. Breaking Update—it gets cold too. Since Sandy was such a popular non-hurricane hurricane, I understand we had to name this storm too. Hercules! Well this isn't Olympus and the tunic won't keep you too warm. We are all hunkered down waiting for the Abominable Snowman to attack.

Although I don't want to sound too jaded, snow and cold just happen. It's not a natural disaster, is it? It is a boon for the entrepreneurs with their shovels and plows, and the hardware stores report thriving business. "Oh darn, they canceled school and I so wanted to go," said no teacher or student ever. And what of sleds and snowballs and snow angels? Ski resorts are able to make ends meet after some dismal years. Last I heard, the country was in significant drought, so the snow will help. Do the rest of us just wave our sword-like ice scrapers and scoff at them?

Snow is a great equalizer, it chills even the warmest hearts among us. But it also provides a clean blanket for the world; covering up even the dirtiest of dirt. It shelters the spring flowers and reminds us of the great circle of life. To everything a season. It is just as hard to see the bright side of -8 degrees as it is to 110 degrees. But how much more do we appreciate the Spring and Fall, or the temperate seasons, after having survived the extremes.

Mother Nature, kind of like our moms, always has a way of reminding us that to see the blooms of spring, we must endure the perils of winter. In order to appreciate what we have, we have to be without. Without failure, we would never savor success. In order to know love, we must know loneliness or hate.

The happiest people are also the most grateful. For each moment we hate, we may love its polar opposite. And just as some like to roast, some like to freeze. In the swelter we long for the snow and in the snow, we dream of the tropics. Flip-flops and snow boots have the same purpose—to help you walk another mile in your adventure. Be happy to have something on your feet.

So for now, bundle-up, snuggle in and enjoy. It's all part of the human experience.

Salt and pepper

I spilled it all over the table. I was doing some rare cleaning and over it went. I think they put something in it to make sure it's free flowing and it sure did. A pool of white crystals all over. Good thing the DEA didn't come in then; they'd think I was manufacturing Meth or something. I took a pinch and tossed it over my left shoulder. Old superstition. Salt was rare and it was considered sacrilegious to waste it back in ancient times. Apparently, the devil is supposed to sit on your left shoulder. Tossing a pinch over went into his eyes so he couldn't see the careless thing you did. But for me, it was just an old mess.

Many of us fear getting old. We spend our time and money trying to chase the years away by dressing younger, dying our hair, or doing other things to recapture our youth. But for some of us, we wear our gray as a sign of distinction and battle scars. We earned each one of them. For some reason the "salt and pepper" look is prized among men and middle-aged sex symbols. I wonder how that works out for bald guys?

But I don't really want to relive my youth. Looking back from afar, it may reminisce well but when I look more closely, there were many of the same challenges as today—and less wisdom to deal with them. The path may not have been clear then, but the difference now is that I can see where I've been. Where I'm going is still a work in progress.

Aside from genetics, your experience has made you what you are today. I have been given many gifts and blessings, for which I am grateful. These are what form the foundation of my life. Mistakes and spilled salt happen, no need to dwell on them. Best to toss some at the devil and keep moving forward. More accomplishments—and gifts—await.

Leave room

I rarely go out for coffee but it was such a beautiful morning I plucked up my courage, saying to myself, *what the heck*. I am always a bit intimidated by the vast array of drink choices listed on the menu board. Not only are there three or four choices of regular coffee but 87,000 possible combinations. I listened carefully to other people's orders, trying to learn how to be cool. The guy in front of me added two shots of espresso to his order. I think that's called rocket fuel or something. Armed with a bit of bravery, I perused the menu and picked something not quite that exotic, just a regular blend of some sort. The perky barista asked, "Do you want room for cream?" Without even thinking, I agreed. Stuttering is so not cool.

Life presents many choices and challenges. You can easily get lost in the mix, paralyzed by the overwhelming choices. For each choice, there are multiple variations that make the outcome just a little different. What's important is for each of us to make the choices that make sense. Rocket fuel for the high speed and "regular" for the ordinary. Whatever fills your cup.

But remember to always leave a little room for the extra, sweet things in our life. Love, passion and prayer are what truly make us full.

Venti please, with room for cream.

Always one more

They were ankle deep when I came out this morning. I suppose they have been accumulating for a while; it happens this time of year. I kicked through them as I walked, like a 6 year-old, secretly enjoying it. But with nary a leaf left in the trees, it was probably time to get them cleaned up. I again relished the fact that I didn't have to do it. But there was an older man furiously raking them into a huge pile, the kind that kids cannot resist jumping in. The pile was nearly as tall as he was in his slightly hunched-over raking position. When I came back from lunch, a flawless carpet of green shimmered with his accomplishment. He had taken off his jacket and was just finishing the last pile of leaf crumbs. And then with a quick gusty sneeze, the field was littered once again. With a sigh of resolve, he grudgingly grabbed his rake and returned to rustle with them again.

We all have tasks that we don't like to do. We try to avoid them for as long as we can, but at some point they need to get done. And although we may feel quite the sense of accomplishment when we're done, sometimes what's done isn't done. In a quick second, the task is at hand again. So it seems with some of my quests. But with determination we return to the field, ready to face the renewed challenge. Things may never be perfect. But if we can learn to tackle our challenges with resolve, even if not with complete joy, we can and will move forward.

As I pass, I murmur to the guy with a bit of a smile, "It's fine, well done."

Jump up

Children on the playground are a joy to watch. They really are looking for a sense of control, in a free-for-all kind of way. Each doing their own thing, cooperatively and independently. The rules continually change, each one trying to get an advantage over the other or just to express themselves. As I insert myself into their world, they readjust their activities to try and engage me. Of course, being the only adult male there, I occasionally become the center of attention. I bring my own games, designed to help them learn cooperative play though success, and a lot of laughter. One of their favorites is "Head Five."

It's simple, really. All I ask is that the kids jump up and bump their heads into my hand, which hovers above their head. Depending on their size, my hand moves closer or further away to increase the challenge. They seem to line up for a long time to have the chance to jump up. Some are very serious and should consider careers in the NBA. Others, well, their feet belong on the ground. Of course, they never seem to quite catch on that I move my hand closer to make sure they are all successful in their jumps.

Each of us can be a bit like children in a playground in our daily lives: doing our thing, trying to get an edge, or just expressing ourselves, cooperating, and acting independently. Most of us will jump at some time. We push ourselves to achieve, whether it is in a major work accomplishment or a simple interaction. We strive to get that "atta-boy" and a sense of a job well done. But we are all differently-abled. Some of us can jump high and achieve highly visible things while others get that sense of accomplishment from simply participating. What's important is that we bring our own sense of free-form joy and do the best we can. When we do, we all get a "Head Five."

Zoom in

No matter what I tried, it just didn't work well. I fussed with all of the settings and tried again. No luck. Since I was by myself and alone there, I decided to keep trying. I am reasonably intelligent; I had even read the manual. *I can get this*, I thought. I held steady, framed the vision just right and click. Nope, still not clear. I tried a half a dozen times or more and it just didn't work, or work well. My eyes could see it perfectly but no matter what settings I tried on my point and pray camera, the picture was still not clear. As my recharge battery light came on, I angrily tossed it back in my pocket.

Most of my pictures come out very well; many people comment that they are terrific. One of my muses always says I have a good eye for the artistic. My friend Dawn says they are just BT (Been There) pictures, but they are keepsakes from my journeys. But several times during the past few weeks, I have tried to take some shot or other and it just was pixelated, fuzzy, or blurry. Maybe I should have invested in a better-than thrift store camera, but I like just being able to keep it in my pocket and not deal with all of the drama of carrying a mega, every-option camera.

In life too, some things just are fuzzy no matter what lens you try. They may appear crystal clear in your vision, like your plans, hopes, and dreams, but when you try to capture them they just don't work out well. Countless times I have had so many options in front of me and, like my blurry pictures, they haven't come out the way I planned.

But I did learn something both about life and my camera. Better to focus on the things that have a better probability of coming out than the ones that

seem too far away. So now I still point, shoot and pray, but I can quickly move on when I don't get the desired results. Some pictures are just not meant to be taken. And sometimes you have to put the camera down and just be there.

Balancing your dreams tempered with reality is the key. It doesn't mean that you should stop trying. If it doesn't work well, shift your focus on your strengths. Zoom in on what you do well and experience the rest as the joy of the moment.

And don't forget to keep your battery charged with love and prayer, or it just won't work at all.

Misaligned

It was annoying, especially here where everything seems so precise and over-engineered, and even decorative. Even though I admired the craftsmanship, the cabinet door just didn't work well. Every time I walked by I gave it a shove of varying degrees. Sometimes it would slam and bounce back at me, and other times it almost, but not quite, closed. It didn't appear to be mangled or broken but the latch simply wouldn't catch. I really should tell them about it but it was just a bit trivial: I can live with it. Finally, I studied it for a millionth time and figured it out. It was an installation error. If I just lifted up on the door a tiny bit it held firm. Ta-Da!

It's easy to get frustrated in our daily lives by the little things. Especially when the easy just isn't. You get started in what seems to be a simple project, but as you get into it, it just keeps springing back open. Try as we might, we can't seem to get it done. I had a workbench full of stuff like that back at home. I would get frustrated, or didn't have the right tool or part, and walked away annoyed.

But really, sometimes it's just a bit of misalignment. We forget to be thankful for all of the grace and blessings we have. Sure, life can be annoying but most of the annoyances are just trivial. If we can figure out some way to ignore them, or even rig it a bit, we can just move on.

Now when I look at the askew door I think, I am grateful to even have one. Perhaps a little patience, and a little lift of gratitude and prayer, is all it takes to make things right.

Another notch

They were a little snug. Not quite "suck it in and pray" tight, but definitely, um, er, form-fitting. It was kind of depressing. As I sorted and cursed, it was difficult to look at all the ones that made the trip with promise of thinner. I was running around right before I left trying to make sure I could find something to fit my waistline. Which seems to have continued to expand for the past several months. It doesn't take much and you have to work like hell to shrink it. But today, they were a bit loose. Not quite a size down but enough that I could breathe and tighten the belt another notch. Yippee!

It's easy to get used to the things that don't quite fit in our lives. Through adaptation, we can get used to most anything. Much of the change in our lives happens slowly. Sure there are those big events, like marriage, relocations and new jobs, but for the most part, things just drift a little here and there. Before you know it, things that seemed like they fit before now just don't. Even when you try hard to fit in again, you can look like an overstuffed sausage.

Things happen for a reason—not that I am fatalistic. Most of us make the best decisions we can with the information we have. A zillion micro-decisions and before you know it, your life closet is full of old stuff that doesn't fit any more.

So we get new choices, new opportunities to update. Diet and workout, new clothes, or more self-love just the way you are. The good news is that we can change to something that's a better fit, we just have to set our mind to it. One notch at a time.

But damn, those sans-a-belt pants were so comfortable!

Crummy

I scoured the store with an eagle eye, looking for all of the ingredients. Working from memory, it wasn't a very orderly process. Since I wasn't familiar with the store, and I was in a different country, it made the task that much harder. Up and down the sparse aisles I scanned, looking for each of the dozen or more items I needed. I had made the dish many times but it had been a while. I had to go back and forth a few times in each row, trying to visually identify some of the things. Finally, I think I had it all... expect for one thing. Around the store again, twice—no luck. No worries, I thought, there are actually clerks here so I'll just ask. I approached a kind-hearted looking man, thinking he might know English. He was even in the area I thought the product should be. I smiled and asked, "Where might I find breadcrumbs?" His smile turned to a quizzical frown, kind of like the RCA Victor dog, and he replied... "You want just the crumbs?" It was beyond his comprehension why anyone would want the crumbs. He went in search of someone else to help. In spite of my best efforts, we just couldn't find them.

But the crumbs were critical; they were the binding and the finishing touch. Without them, the dish simply wouldn't work. It's remarkable that something so simple was so complicated. Twenty minutes later I gave up looking and decided to make my own. I bought perfectly good bread sticks and crushed them up.

Most of us seem to be able to figure out the big things, more or less. We share common values, beliefs, and desires. With a little work, we can find what we need. But really, in many ways, it is the little things that do matter—and sometimes it is the little things that make the biggest difference.

Words, actions, and kindness are the binding that holds it all together. Without those ingredients, we lose the joy of daily living.

When you can't find the little things that matter, you can just make your own. Even if it's crummy, it will still work out.

The box

It was faded and near pink. The sun and snow had taken its toll. It must have been really something special to have deserved such a grand wrapper. You could tell it was the crowning touch when it was new, but now it was ready for the dustbin, faded and purposeless like last night's empty champagne bottle. What once was festive and hinted of excitement was now part of the memories of the past. The huge bow now lay forlorn on the empty boxes, waiting for its recycling.

We tie bows on all sorts of things to help celebrate the season. Wrapped packages always seem to glisten a little brighter when adorned with ribbon. Many times I'll spring for the store wrapping just to make the gifts for friends and family that much brighter. But really, the gift inside is what it is all about.

We all have gifts to share. We know that what's on the inside is really what counts, but sometimes we think that we may not be perfect enough, and somehow if we only had that one more thing, we would be presentable and perhaps more loved. We search for the bow in our lives too—perfect friends, family, and a challenge-free existence.

But as the glitter of each moment fades, we have to once again be content with what we have. It's not the bow or box that makes the difference; it's what inside that will bring happiness. Sure, we can still look for bows and that extra touch, but it is more important that we give away our gifts. It is only in the giving of ourselves that we will find authentic satisfaction and fulfillment.

Sniff

Dozens pass my window every day, at all hours. You can really tell a lot about them by just looking. Some appear to be very happy, or happy to be out, while others seem like a fat guy on a treadmill agonizing with every step. You can tell a lot about their caretakers too. Some hurry along either pulling or nearly running to keep up. For some it is clearly a chore; they huddle hunched over, prompting and prodding to get it over with. Others appear to saunter, taking in the world with each step.

It always amuses me when the caretaker and the dog don't match. You see these big hulky guys with little dust mop dogs, or petite women who could probably ride their dog instead of walk it. But for the most part, the dogs are pretty transparent. At a glance, you can tell how they are doing. Tails awaggin and happy, or yippin in protection or fear of whatever crosses their path. I saw this big Rottweiler cowering in fear from a squirrel, and a purse-size canine ferociously attempting to devour a passing car. It made me smile when the undersized dustmop lifted its leg in expression of dislike for the newly parked car that was threatening it. But regardless, they have all figured out a way to be who they are just happy to be.

We can learn a lot by the dog's transparency. We can approach the day, eager for new adventures, happy just to be with our friends. Or we can cower in fear or self-protection against the unknown.

If we approach each new situation with our tail waggin', we might get a pat on the head, or even a treat. Snarling and threatening will only get you distain and fear. But as the saying goes, 'bark less, wag more' and you will certainly be able to experience your walk in life with smiles. Of

course, you should sniff around a bit, but don't let the unknown control your emotions.

And don't forget your pooper scooper—sometimes there is just a lot of crap.

Guide

I was as excited as a kid at Christmas. I had wanted one for months and I finally got one! I anxiously opened the box and admired my new toy. I could hardly wait to play with it. As I sat in anticipation, I scoured the box for a user's guide. No luck, not even a thin half-sheet of paper. It seems that these days manufacturers just think we can figure it out or go online to get instructions. But since it was a computer tablet, you have to get online to figure out how to get online. Pretty annoying.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all came with user guides? Simple instructions on what to do and not to do. A "how to" tailored to our specific model. Perhaps it could be simply titled, "How to handle our emotions." It could contain some cute yellow triangles with cautionary notes or even the critical "handy tips." Maybe a cutesy cartoon character or two. For the simple things, a few well-drawn pictures would help. When to smile or what should make us sad are pretty easy. But there are complexities to many of our emotions. Sometimes no matter what we do, we just can't seem to activate the cool little features that make the average extraordinary. If we could just turn to page 27A a little paragraph would show us the way. But for the stubborn among us, we continue to fumble and click, hoping we will stumble across the answers. And sometimes we just stumble.

We may not realize that we have actually had many guides in our lives. Often we take them for granted. We spend our time looking for some sort of instructions, hoping that the answers are somewhere. But if you take time to notice, you'll see there are dozens of people who influence you every day. I always imagine them to be like those rails that pop up in bumper bowling that prevent us from falling in the gutter. Just a bounce here and

there and we make it down the alley. We may not get a strike but surely we'll get a few pins down.

As adults, we get to pick who our guides will be. Where will we turn when things are just a bit too complex? For many of us, our spouses, friends, and our faith are in our index. If we just look them up and then turn to the right page, the answer is there.

Better to look in the index than the appendix when our life is done.

Scribbles

It was an intriguing design but I had no idea what it was. Multi-colored and very cursive. It must have taken quite a while and I couldn't even fathom taking the time to draw it, especially in a toilet stall. There were four of them, two on the door and one on each side. I tried to imagine an artist working, hovering with multiple markers. I suppose they do get a captive audience but somehow I just don't get the creative bug when I am in the bathroom. Still, the stall walls were covered with, um... er... art. But this wasn't the usual "for a good time call" stuff but lots of artsy kind of stuff. Of course, they were probably some sort of gang symbol but I can't think that claiming a bathroom stall for the gang would be important.

Creative expression comes in all forms. Each of us has some talent somewhere, even if we haven't yet discovered what that is. Some talents are expressed in unusual ways and places. Like swirls drawn in a bathroom stall. But what's important is that talent is expressed. Even bathroom art helps those expressing it connect with their core expression. What some may view as crappy graffiti, others see important enough to draw in the bathroom.

After all the "earth" without "art" is just eh.

Block

I never checked on what the weather was doing at home since I wasn't going to be there. In my haste to get out of town I was careless and left it outside on my deck. It would have only taken seconds to bring it in, but I wasn't thinking. And now it was a solid block of ice from the snow. I am usually more careful, since several have cracked before from the freeze. It looked okay though, but was encased and frozen solid. I thought I could violently attack it to chip it out but the risk of breaking it was pretty high. I could pour hot water over but surely that would crack the glass. Really, the safest way was to wait for the sun to melt it. I moved it to be in the direct sunlight. I can wait, but still I missed my familiar mug that accompanied my daily ponderings and writing.

Sometimes things freeze unexpectedly. Things that you take for granted become hard. Relationships, routines, and love need to be maintained if they are going to be fulfilling. If you ignore them or forget about them, they can become stagnant and frozen. If you try too hard to fix them, sometimes they just break and shatter. Of course, you can just wait for the warmth of the sun to thaw them, but sometimes even that needs a little help. Prayer does work, but not always on our time schedule and not always in time.

If you take some care to maintain your relationships, they are usually okay. But if you forget the simple things, like words of praise, affection and caring, or leaving people out in the cold, things can get frozen quickly. If you think about some of your relationship challenges, communication is probably the biggest one. Communication is as much listening and understanding as it is talking.

Take the time to care about all things. Pay attention to what matters most, including others' thoughts and feelings. And when you forget, take the time to make sure things warm slowly.

As the Supremes said, "You can't hurry love."

Always another

I really had no business being in an advanced class, but the timing worked out with my schedule, so I thought I'd give it a try. Even after twenty classes in three weeks, my moves were still as bad as a 12-year-old at the Sadie Hawkins dance. I am anything but advanced. The old *al dente* muscles were getting looser but most of the precision was elusive. Except for that one time as I spun up to the Warrior Two. My flow was smooth, the form terrific, and I moved exactly in time with my breath. It was a powerful pose and I relished the moment. *Hey! I can do this*, I thought.

We spend our lives preparing for a moment. We try to line up everything just perfect. Macro and micro decisions rule our minutes trying to achieve that ultimate dream. Some dream of success for ourselves, others for their kids, or even more lofty goals of impacting the world around them. But often we never seem to quite get there. Something just isn't right or we shift to the "only ifs." That list always seems longer than the "I'm glad I'm here."

When our preparation works, it is amazing. We bask in the fleeting moment of accomplishment, postured to conquer the world. But in an instant it's gone. We shift back to the list of "What's next," like the athletes on commercials that used to say I am going to Disneyland.

There is always another moment in front of you, no matter how sweet the one is that you are savoring. Our lives are really just a series of moments as we continue down our paths to fulfillment. Each small victory is important to experience as an accomplishment. If you live your life moment to

moment you will always have that sense of power. It lies at the core of each of us, if only we can stretch into it with the flow.

The moment was gone and I surely flubbed the next yogi move. But for that one moment, it was amazing. Glad I was there to experience it.

Wagging is better

It seemed like it was almost non-stop. I guess it wasn't; it just seemed like it. Hour upon hour it was incessant. I kept thinking at some point he'd get tired—I know I was. From the moment I walked up to the house, and most of the night, he just barked. It wasn't a deep "I'll rip you to shreds" bark, but a yappy, kind-of-scared bark. It didn't seem to have anything to do with me since I'm pretty quiet. He had to be making his owners nuts, if they were even there. Someone suggested earplugs, though I shamelessly thought muzzles and weapons. Regardless, it was very annoying.

It seems that there are many people who spend their days barking. Regardless of what is going on, they complain, grouse, and are generally unhappy. On and on they drone, forcing others to hear them whether they want to or not. It's a "look at me and be afraid" kind of bark. They push others away with their noise, protecting their territory.

But most of them are just scared. They are afraid of whatever threats might be in front of them and push people away before they even have a chance to get close. They think it's safer to keep people at a distance so they can't get hurt.

In my experience though, they really do want to make friends. They are just scared of intimacy. Perhaps it's because they have been hurt before or never known kindness and love. A kind word or two, and a scratch behind the ears will usually calm their fears. It just takes a more cautious approach. It's easy to say "wag more, bark less," but it takes the kindness and love of another to truly help allay their fears. Without it, they will just keep barking away.

To borrow from Barbara Woodhouse, there is no such thing as a bad person. Love, kindness and faith will help them, and you, to make a kinder, gentler world. The phrase, "kill them with kindness" is better than using your own weapons.

But earplugs might work too.

Find the sidewalk

It just kept piling up. I'd push, sweep, and shovel but every time I looked there was more there. Glued to the Weather Channel, I kept watching the storm. Boston was supposed to get two feet and back home they were supposed to get three. Out my door I barely had a foot. A few days back I was thinking how unlucky I was to be in the frozen tundra and now I feel grateful. We *only* got a foot. That would have been headlines last week but today it doesn't even make the cut as news. One of my neighbors, who I don't know, shoveled my walkway. What a nice gesture.

Life is full of challenges. We seem to always lament the fact that things aren't going the way we want them too. I see this daily as I talk to people in session. It's true that some people have very significant challenges but even when they are minor, they can escalate them into full-blown crises. Whatever the challenge, we feel that our problems are somehow different and most definitely worse.

But when you think about things like the storm, we develop a sense of community around it. We huddle and grin about how terrible everything is and feel like we're all in it together, regardless of how many challenges there are. One of the key things in therapy is normalization. As we help our clients to know that they are not alone in their thoughts and that others have weathered similar things, they begin to see the sidewalk under the snow. The path becomes a bit clearer.

Sure things are a bit yucky, but we all have yucky sometimes. If we look in the world we can find strength from our friends, neighbors and faith. You are not alone in your struggles. Reach out to others and your problems will not seem as significant. Together we can dig out of almost anything.

Slow is better

People look at me like I am a weird Suzie homemaker. When I even mention a crockpot I get a quizzical look. For a while, I was with them. I would just stop and grab some junk to eat on the way home. Fast food fills the hole but isn't very healthy. My waistline sure showed it. Of course, many people own one but it seems that people rarely use them. While I am away from home for an extended time, I think they work terrific. I used to buy one every time I went on assignment. They just made things a bit easier, especially when you're tired from a long day and don't feel like cooking. People automatically think of some sort of chili or stew, but with my trusty cookbook, there are all kinds of simple things that you can cook slowly. Everything from fish to steak. With the timer, I am greeted by luscious smells when I walk in the door. You can even put in frozen stuff and it will be just fine. That is, if I remember to turn the dumb thing on. More than once I have come home ready to eat, only to be met with a cold kind of yucky looking soup. Still, the crockpot works great.

In these days of fast food and "grab and go" we forget that sometimes slow is the better way to go. We get so used to instant gratification that we think that we must have what we want immediately. We think that if we don't get our needs meet instantly that it just won't be any good. But instant gratification fades quickly and usually just adds to cravings for more junk. I love Taco Bell, KFC and M & M's, but I know I can't live on them.

Some things just take time. It may be old-fashioned, but things such as friendship and love are best cooked slowly. At the end of the day, slow-cooked relationships will be nourishing *and* healthy.

Clean it off

I am pretty sure they don't use blackboards anymore; I think people are allergic to chalk now. They used to cover the entire expanse of the front wall, and sometimes the back too. The day's lesson or activity would be neatly printed across the top. I remember moments of terror being asked to come up and write on them. Once in 5th grade, my much-hated math teacher was trying to punish me for my usual acting out in class and asked me to come forward to solve a problem. Of course, like many, I suck at math. And before the days of bullying, it was okay for the teachers to let the class pick on you. But just this once I knew the answer! I proudly scrawled it down but was a bit sloppy. She tried to pick on me for my writing but there was no denying I got it right. I proudly strutted back to my seat in the back corner, feeling her eyes suntan the back of my neck. I caught a few admiring glances from classmates. After class I had the punishment of cleaning off the blackboards.

Each of us has an internal blackboard that we write on every day. Agendas, problems, praise, victories and defeats are all scrawled across the expanse. Although sometimes the mundane is there, other times there are other confusing problems to try and understand. We can fearfully avoid them but yet they remain there taunting us. Sometimes we are afraid to even try for fear of facing ridicule.

But we are capable of amazing things, in spite of others' expectations. If we approach our tasks straightforward and unafraid, we at least have a chance of getting it right. The thrill of victory is really much sweeter than the agony of defeat. And even if we fail, we get to erase our blackboard every day and try again tomorrow. Fail to try and you surely will. And even if you do, there is nothing like a clean slate to draw our tomorrows on.

Infomercial

Late night TV is just annoying. It gets worse after the talk shows and reruns. Seems it's entirely infomercials selling the best new thing. They go through excruciating details with incredibly enthusiastic audiences, all to make a sale. I often wonder if anyone really watches these shows, let alone buys anything. I am always amused when I find these incredible gadgets littering the thrift stores.

I wonder what it would be like if we had our own personal infomercials. Would mine tout my résumé accomplishments in a fast-moving montage? Lots of glossed up, past accomplishments in a continuous loop? Perhaps they would have images of the fat and skinny me with Jared-like Subway pants? Maybe me on bended knee with a crying soldier. Or a Mary Tyler Moore-like opening sequence of me in my smoking jacket poised over the keyboard.

The challenge in thinking about your own infomercial is that most of it is based on the idealized past. We tend to remember things as better than they were. I am definitely not my résumé; there were some Stephen King-like horror stories there. Mary Tyler Moore? I don't even own a beret. I quit smoking and many days my keyboard is wet from perspiration. I have helped point some soldiers in the right direction though.

You should not be defined by your past. The late night TV in your head that keeps you awake some nights may contain clues as to who you are, but to borrow from a prospectus, past performance does not define future earnings. The past is just past, just fleeting montages of good, bad, and blah.

But it doesn't define you any more than the thrift store rotisserie makes the buyer a better homemaker.

You can achieve a better tomorrow if you focus on a better right now. Let go of the past and look forward to the future. You're going to make it after all!

Tune in

We used to have four TV channels, on a good day. If the weather was nice, and you held your tongue just right, we got a few more. Of course the ones that didn't come in were the good ones on UHF. But there either was, or wasn't, something to watch. Changing channels wasn't such a big deal—no need to surf or have a remote. Of course, the images were not even 25% as good as today's phones. And color TV was for the wealthy; ours was black and white, till I was at least in middle school. But TV was an event. I remember our folding TV trays with our TV dinners in front of the evening's premier. On Sunday night we always used to hope that the Wonderful World of Disney was a cartoon. Pretty high living. And now we sit and push buttons, looking through hundreds of channels in disgruntled disgust. So many people say they don't actually watch it, but just keep it on in the background in case they have a mere moment of boredom. And we wonder why the incidence of ADHD is increasing.

It seems we do more and more to pass each and every moment with channel surfing speed. A quick glance, a momentary evaluation, and on to the next thing. Good or bad, we have moved on—looking for that new channel or program that will somehow be a little more thrilling than the last. Life's best comes from simplicity. The moments we treasure most aren't the ones that pass by at the flick of a finger. A soft, gentle touch... A feeling of pride or a kiss on your child's forehead. The list is long but not complex. In today's multi-tasking world, we often miss what is truly important. Was it the Wonderful World of Disney? Probably not. But it was the savoring and anticipating the moments that got us there.

Take time to put the remote down, turn off your screens, and just be in the moment. There you find the happiest moments of all.

Piled high

There was a whole pile of stuff; well, a few piles of papers in a few places, actually. I kind of knew what was in one even though I hadn't touched it for months. I thought it important then, I suppose, or I wouldn't have saved it. I had carried it all the way upstairs to my desk after all. Heck, I had even carefully dusted it without moving a page. The other one was kind of new, just stuff I haven't dealt with over the past two weeks. I pretty much knew what was in there though, kind of. It's always amazing how fast paperwork accumulates. I could barely see my desk under the piles.

In life, we get new stuff in every day to deal with. Some of it is just junk and we immediately discard it, like junk mail. Other things we need to pay some attention to, like the grocery list or where you parked your car. You need it for a little bit but then you can forget it. But then there is that pile of clutter that you don't want to deal with. We are careful not to disturb it although we all know it's there. Sometimes we don't even know all of what's in there but are kind of afraid to get started on it.

As I sat to face Mt. Clutter, I was full of dread. It was kind of big. I sure hope there wasn't something important in there that I had forgotten. And there wasn't! Most of it was just stuff to be filed or reread. A bunch was outdated now and could even be pitched. There was one thing that took me two minutes and a call to clear up. All that worry and avoidance for nothing.

We all accumulate stuff we have to deal with, like it or not. It's part of daily living. The longer you avoid it, the bigger the pile and the more you fear it. But getting rid of your emotional clutter is an important task. It takes some time, thought, and maybe even a little work, but if you can, make your

daily clutter go away. Although the task may be tainted with forebode, if you take just a little time each day, the pile won't get that big and you can get through it.

Today's the day to get it done! Sort through that pile and get rid of your junk and fears. And then you can find space to work and live again.

Be the light

Of course I didn't think I had the four batteries necessary: that's like a whole pack. They were buried way down the bottom of the junk drawer and of course I had trouble finding them. I thought I'd check since snowzilla was forecast again. But for once, I did have them. I opened the flashlight to find green dust and acid. No wonder it wasn't working. I tapped the old ones out and the goo got all over me. Best to wash up before continuing. Clean all the terminals and put in the fresh ones. Click! Nothing... Click a few more times, as if a click can be faulty. Nada. I reopened and scrutinized. Ah, I have to point the positive side all in one direction. Click! Yay! The flashlight works.

It is easy to get corroded. All you have to do is sit still and do nothing. All of that energy will just leak out and gum up the works. And even though you used to work just fine, now you're not much use to anyone. Cozy in the drawer, you don't have to do anything except exist.

But that is not what you are made for. Our purpose is to provide light for those that can't see. To help others find their way in a storm or when they get lost. It's a simple task really. You don't have to be as bright as the sun but just have to provide some light. An inquiry, smile, a kindness or just reaching out is all that it takes.

In order to do that you have to be ready yourself. Taking care of yourself is pretty simple too. First, make sure you can find yourself in all of the clutter. You may have to dig deep but you are there. Give yourself a little click to see if you light up. Take care of yourself; you deserve it. Take time to clean up any messes you have, it won't take long. Life is meant to enjoy, not

corrode. If you think of the many of the parables in the Bible, many took place at parties. Even the first miracle of making wine for the guests was about enjoying the here and now.

And finally, make sure you always align yourself to the positive. Pointing up, you can surely help others light the way.

Be well lit.

Not quite

And then there are days when it does, but other times it just isn't quite right. You move through the days, waiting and hoping for it to be just so. Anticipation is thick—we've all been there. The long days right before vacation, the nervous, graceless poise before the first kiss, the excitement of that long-awaited new novel, or the wait for that phone call. You can almost taste it, but not quite, as it lingers on the back of your tongue. Energy and spirits are high as you contemplate the ideal.

Finally the moment arrives without herald or fanfare—and it just isn't. The kiss is sisterly, the ice begins to crack, and it rains every day of your vacation. You deflate several inches as the helium comes out of your balloon. FML, or sucks to be me, you think, as you wallow in the muck of disappointment.

Although there may not be a master plan for our lives, the road we travel is the one that we must. No power on earth can change your outcomes; they will be what they will be. All you can do is to prepare for the journey and let the road bring what may. Potholes, pit stops, and breakdowns are as predictable as the eventual reward of finishing. But this is the stuff of life! This is what we signed up for, even though we may not remember it when we're changing the tire in the pouring rain.

Face each day ready for your journey, eager for the challenges ahead. What will be will be, and you can only be your best. But your best is more than good enough.

Between

I have been here before but each time feels a little different. Whether it happens at night, in the Fall, or even every six months, it always full of frustration. We seem to feel that it's definitely not where we want to be regardless of when or how it happens. More often than not we are really there anyway; we just don't like to think about it that way. We spend extraordinary amounts of time, energy, and focus trying to move from it only to find ourselves there once again. Sandwiched in between what was and what may be, there is always a *middle*.

It seems that none of us ever want to be in the middle. Between jobs, relationships, houses. Being the middle child is supposed to be the absolute worst. We can always be found boasting of our significant accomplishments but never of the "just another day" kind of days. And of course our kids are all amazing, and as Garrison Keilor says, "They are all above average, right?" The middle of the pack, the night, or of the pile somehow just speaks of average and mundane.

If you think about it, where else would you rather be? None of us want to return to the cradle and most of us dread being on the wrong side of the turf. Between those moments lots will happen that we love, hate, remember, or anticipate. The middle is what it takes to get wherever we want to be, so why the dread?

Long journeys are hard. Although we may always want to be at some new place, we still have to get there. Unearned victories are shallow at best. Enjoy the path between here and there. The past will remain past no matter how many times you look over your shoulder. My damn crystal ball still doesn't work so I can't see the future. But I can see and enjoy the here and now.

Now please don't interrupt me, I am in the middle of something.

Initialize

It was just three letters, but I had no idea what they meant. I kind of sort of guessed the context, but if they asked anything direct, I was going to look like a fool. It seems that each company, culture, and area of specialization all get caught up in their own abbreviations. And just when you get them figured out, you realize that depending on who said it and when, they could have totally different meanings. In the military, people are kind of offended if you use the army abbreviation in the air force, and vice-versa. In my entire family, all of our initials could be used to reference something else: MR, ER, AR, JR, RR, DR... the list goes on and on. Of course my son isn't an emergency room, and my daughter isn't accounts receivable either, more like accounts payable.

But we are so busy that we can't spell things out or say them out loud. How could we waste those few keystrokes or breaths? Of course, if you are "in the know," you'll know what we mean. We need to convey our points quickly, so get used to it right? I looked up the initials online. Forget it, there were dozens of possibilities.

It seems that many of us talk in code. It's fine when we are trying to communicate with those who know us. We have all seen when a single, out of context word, like "toaster," conveys a whole conversation or argument to a couple. We stand there with a blank look as they relive the challenge in living Technicolor.

The problem, of course, is context. Different initials mean different things at different times to different people. MR on an application is a salutation, Mental Retardation at a hospital, Moon River to Henry Mancini, or just my initials. No wonder sometimes we are misunderstood.

As I Googled around, I finally figured it out. It was a Japanese abbreviation. Once translated, I got it and was able to find what I needed. But if the sender had just taken a few moments to spell it out, I would have been on the same page.

Be clear in your meaning or your thoughts will never be understood. Take time to speak simply, unburdened by jargon, hidden meaning and innuendo. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Miscommunication isn't communication at all. It just plain old misses the Mr. or Mrs.

Holding up

They were here when I got here but I didn't use a single one. None of them were in the right spots. I really don't even notice them much anymore. But there were more than a dozen nail holes and anchors in various places all over the wall. It was obvious that the last renter was very meticulous. There were markings, lines, shadows and erased measurements in evidence. I am surprised the landlord let them get away with it. It was hard to tell what was in some of the spots since the spacing was unusual. Nonetheless, the anchors remained from whatever he had hung.

It is not unusual to anchor yourself to things in the world. We all have things that we hold up as part of who we are. Some we share with many others, like being the best parent or spouse. Others are unique to us alone—our own interests, ambitions, or beliefs. Our characters are our personal artwork that we put up for our own enjoyment and for the world to see.

What is right for some is not right for all. The anchors of others, although well secured, may not work for you. I can look at the shadows of what's left and try to imagine, but they really don't match what I am all about.

It is important to celebrate with others what they believe. Their hopes and dreams are just as important as your own. But it is equally important that you create your own anchors to hold up what is dear to you. It is only there that your beauty can be on display for others to see.

Temperature

They were quite the rage for a while. Seems most everyone has one now; I inherited mine from my mom, and she loved it. Actually, I had given it to her for Christmas a few years back. She would check it several times a day just to get a feel for what was going on outside. I think the older we get, the more we are concerned with the weather for some reason. I see people glued to the TV waiting on every update. Their smart phones, computers, all beep with updates every few minutes. It seems to be an obsession to know what the weather is doing, or going to do.

When we were young, we pretty much ignored the weather. We relied on our parents to chase us around with the right stuff to protect us from the elements. As we get a little older, we decide that we are invincible. I see young people walking around in flip-flops and shorts... in the snow. The older we get though, the more we worry about how the elements will affect us. Last year I remember chuckling at some seniors walking on the boardwalk with long pants and turtlenecks. They missed the concept as much as the kids in the snow did.

Of course we can't control the weather, and really we aren't all that good at forecasting it either. They say sun and it rains, or heavy snow and we get a dusting. I think more storm warnings are wrong than right. But we have to be ready, right? My transmitter sits in the sun so it is always giving me a false reading.

Emotions can be as unpredictable as the weather. We are expecting a fabulous day and sometimes we get it. Other times some drip brings clouds or rain. Sometimes the minor annoyances cause us to lose our temper.

Thankfully, the other forecast are also sometimes true. Things are way sunnier than forecast. Smiles and giggles brighten up the dreary and you just feel flip-floppy.

Of course we all have snow boots, and umbrellas, and a bathing suit. It makes sense to prepare for the known. But we usually don't wear boots in the summer or bathing suits in the snow, even though we might need to prepare ourselves for a freak storm.

I'd much rather experience the world as it comes. If you approach each day with sunshine and love, it won't matter what the weather is. You can brighten even the worst, without even looking at the forecast.

Always right

At first I thought it was me. It was the first one I changed at daylight savings time as it is usually the first one I look at. Later that day I noticed it was wrong so I fixed it again. But later it was still off... odd, I thought. One more time I adjusted it. Satisfied I finally had it right, I forgot about it. A few days later I noticed it was wrong again, but not by a lot. Must be the battery, so I changed it. Seemed like the right answer again. Sadly, the next day it was off by ten minutes again. Time for a new clock.

I like to quip that broken clocks are usually right twice a day. But in this case, it wasn't true. It seemed perfectly happy being near exactly ten minutes off. I must have changed it five times, and the battery too, and it still wasn't the right time. I did some tests, another new battery, and even gave it a good shake without much luck. For a few days, I just did the math and knew the right time. I was secretly clock shopping. But after three stores, the only one I found that I liked was a Disney princess one, and that would just be wrong in the kitchen. I really did like the old one though. So I just forgot about it and figured what will be will be, and someday I'll get a new one.

But then a miracle happened. Not a water into wine kind of miracle, but a little one nonetheless. It must have known I was looking to replace it. For the past week, it has been keeping perfect time again. I keep checking and rechecking and it hasn't lost a minute. How it could possibly have fixed itself is beyond me.

Often our fears and trepidations prevent us from doing what we need to do. We think it's not the right time and justify not acting. But oddly enough, we

keep looking for the right time. We keep testing, fiddling, and wondering if it is now.

There is no such thing as a perfect time, regardless of what your clock tells you. If you count the minutes that you spend waiting for the right time, you will get good at counting but never get to your goal. And even if you're convinced it isn't the right time, it might be. The best solution isn't a new clock, but overcoming your fear. And the right time for that is always now.

Never cured

I am a news junkie, I confess. It is the last thing I do before I go to bed and the first thing I do in the morning. At first I start with the custom ones designed just for me. Just the highlights, but enough to feed the fix. Sometime they scream, "look at me," like the urgent alerts that buzz in my pocket. But most times they are pretty mundane. Usually I move from the small to the large, getting a feel for what's happened since my last fix. I tend to spend most of my time there and rarely jump head first into the CNN pool of overwhelming. There is just so much there that even though it is new, just doesn't interest me. And when there seemingly isn't anything new, they just stretch what once was new indefinitely. It can become annoying when there just doesn't seem to be any more to say, but somehow their lips keep moving. In spite of that, sometimes the anchor or commentator makes you think a little differently about what is going on. I keep it on in the background; just to be sure I don't miss anything important. Mostly though, I hear without listening.

Each day there is good news all around us. Just because it isn't an urgent alert, doesn't mean that we shouldn't listen to what it is telling us. Better yet, we should take time to make our own news. You can do something every day that rocks your own world. From the subtle to the urgent, there is always something we can change to make things a little different, and even a little more interesting and fulfilling. It doesn't have to be a headline to be important; a simple phone call, an "I love you," or a random kindness may be all it takes to make someone's highlights of the day.

Sunshine, friends, and love are all there if we take the time to get beyond the headlines. I hope I never get cured of *this* addiction.

Another perfect

Edges roughly hewn with ridges of black and white kissed by the cloudless blue. Their hardness faded by the smooth of the melting snow. Ridges dance with sunlight as the day rises strong behind them. Silhouettes and shadows fall onto the birch and green trees kneeling at the foot of the mountain. The snowmelt thunders down silently, nurturing spring's greening blanket. Pools of variegated color form as ponds emerge in a mirrored glimmer. An eagle soars on the wind, surveying his dominion from the cliffs. The forest is alive with reverence as the mountain awakes from its slumber. A spell in time forever etched in my mind, my gaze interrupted only by my thoughts.

People say that perfection doesn't exist, but I disagree. We each have had many moments in our life that are perfect. The cry of our newborn, the delicate first kiss of love, or being at one with your God are but a few. If we stop looking for happily-ever-after and instead give more notice to our perfect moments, we will find that perfection is always there, just waiting to be appreciated.

Life is not about always being perfect, but perfectly being one with yourself. Peace and happiness come from the inside looking out, not the other way around. Sometimes what we see on the outside seems picture perfect and we get to enjoy its magic and mystery. But to be able to see perfection in anything tells us that the beautiful perfection within has been stirred from its slumber.

Perfectly imperfect

I never noticed that they were different. And if anyone else did, they didn't say anything. They were really close, similar color and the same pattern. In the dim, the socks were a perfect match. I'd had been wearing them for weeks without noticing the difference. But packing them in the daylight, it was clear that they were two different socks. At first I thought I had just mis-mated them but after a quick search, neither of the right pair was in the drawer. Of course, the dryer could have spun one of each off into a different dimension but that would have been odd. I felt a bit stupid-silly for a while. It's a good thing my pants were long, people would have laughed.

We live in a world of imperfect choices. What sometimes seems right is wrong and wrong is right. Until it isn't. We do the best with the information we have and walk forward, right or wrong. The funny thing is that even if it isn't quite perfect, we may be the only one that ever knows. It's all in how you think about it. Even though unmatched and imperfect, the socks did everything they were supposed to. They helped cushion my step, took care of the sweat, and didn't even get a hole. What more could you ask of them?

When you think your world is silly-stupid, and you don't feel you can walk on, remember that life isn't about perfection. Even the imperfect can be perfect. Who cares what everyone else thinks: it's really about what you think. And *that,* you have full control over. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and things will be fine.

The flow

When they fixed the faucet, the other one broke. I suppose it could have been broken all along but now it's worse. It's not "broken, broken" but just leaks and drips when it feels like it. All they were supposed to do is add a water-restricting aerator to the kitchen faucet. But now the hose spray in the sink drips every time I use the faucet. I rarely use it—I just push the stuff in the disposal and hit the switch. But it is handy now and then when some of the small and sticky stuff builds up in the sink. It wasn't my idea: the landlord was trying to save money and installed new toilets and restrictors in all the units. Now it seems that they all leak a bit. I have tried half-heartedly to fix them but without any real enthusiasm. Good thing the landlord pays the water bill.

There are days when things flow just right. Things move through at the right pace. You remember to breathe and get the right amount of air. Your emotional faucet works perfectly and you are able to wash away the daily debris with ease. Some of us are even lucky enough to have a garbage disposal where we can grind the junk up with a satisfying whoosh and it's all gone.

And then there are other days when the pressure builds up. It is not always clear why, but some days are harder than others. We leak at the edges and the debris just sticks. And we just keep leaking.

Pressure, by definition, is always building. All systems, from water to emotions, have relief valves. Without pressure, we would just be a stagnant drip. The systems are designed to help balance the pressure so that your flow can work well. Sometimes they leak. But the leaks are part of reducing

the pressure. If we're screwed down too tight, we run the risk of emotional blow-ups. For those of us that have been flooded, we know what a huge mess that is.

So, I don't mind the leaks so much. Better to let the tears fall out than the emotions build. Perhaps someday I can try to fix them again, but for now they are a great release.

No outlet

It was clearly marked "no outlet," but paved and lush with intrigue in its canopied drive. Slightly shadowed, the sun peaked through the trees casting bright patches of light on the gravelly asphalt. It might be bumpy, but if I went slowly, I'd be fine. I turned sharply in. The road wove and winded for a bit. I saw a small fox dart into the woods. A little further down, there was a waterfall. Not very picturesque one, it was falling over hard concrete. But it made my heart leap just the same. I paused for a while and admired its beauty. There was a glaring 'no trespassing' sign a little further on. It kind of made me sad that I probably couldn't stay; I didn't want to leave. I sat there for a bit, and admired its rarely seen beauty.

One of my character flaws is that I am always early. I figure if I get somewhere early I can just wait there. Might be better there than here, so why not? I think being late, even "fashionably so," is wrong. When people ask you to make a commitment, you should try to honor their wishes. And if you're a bit early, you can take a minute to learn something. Today I learned that "no outlet" is different than "dead end." You can get lost in an area that has no outlet, but "dead-ends" just end abruptly.

Our life paths are convoluted and complex. Especially relationships and love, which rarely post warnings. Dead ends don't even give you a chance. But the possibilities of "no outlet" are really what we are looking for. We long to get lost in someone and find their inner beauty. To experience them for all that they are, even if isn't picture perfect. A place to stay and settle.

You have to take chances. "On-purpose" mistakes are not really mistakes. If I wasn't early and a bit adventurous, I would have never turned down that

road and seen its beauty and hidden treasures. I knew that going in I would probably have to turn around. But that wasn't in my mind when I started. I was hoping to find just what I did, a cute fox and a hidden waterfall. I would have been content to stay a lot longer, but the road demanded my exit, no trespassing allowed.

I am very glad that I turned down that road, ignoring its warnings. If it had said "dead end" I wouldn't have gone. But taking the time, although maybe not the right time, I was glad to get lost for a while without an outlet. If given another chance, I would probably go again. But for now, it's time to get back on the path.

The other two too

Eight out of ten: not too bad. I'd love to get that many to agree with me. After all, if eight out of ten think so, it must be pretty darn good. Of course, nine out of ten would be better. It really is never ten out of ten—that would be perfect and we would be very suspicious. But eight is a majority and majority rules. Get on the bus or get run over by it. Everybody is doing it; well, almost.

But then there is the two. Two schleps that for some reason say, bleeck. What do they know that the other eight don't? Are they just negative, persnickety people? They probably don't like anything. Two Eeyores out of ten; why don't they just get a life, get a smile, or get with it. They have to be wrong: 80 % think so anyway.

We get so hung up on what people tell us is the right thing to choose. We are continually blitzed by media, opinions, and commentary about how we should think or act. And the more we hear something, the more we think it's right—until it isn't. And when we disagree with the majority, we either feel inadequate or feel a sense of entitlement to complain about why everyone else is wrong. Kind of like how everybody denied voting for Jessie Ventura in Minnesota but somehow he won. Or Anthony Weiner, he just won again. But I didn't vote for him, and I am right, right?

Self-authority comes from personal discernment. The choices for right and wrong are personal, but should come from your principles and values. In so many things there are no definitive right and wrongs—but we waste so much time arguing, comparing, and trying to prove that eight out of ten, or

one out of a billion, are right. And especially when it comes to toothpaste, or hair products—what does it really matter anyway?

We are all entitled to our own thoughts and feelings. But if we could spend more time trying to agree on our similarities rather than argue about our differences, we would all be a little happier and our smiles would be bright indeed.

You know I am right all the time, except when I am not.

Wash up

It seems that very few of us are even doing it, let alone doing it right. With all of the public awareness about it, it is a bit bewildering. There are signs everywhere indicating that hand washing is mandatory, or at least suggested. Even the people who are doing it regularly aren't doing it for long enough. The article I read indicated that the majority of people don't wash their hands regularly enough, even after using the toilet. And those that do, only wash for just a few seconds—and sometimes without soap! Fifteen seconds is required each time to stop the spread of germs: about as long as it takes to sing the ABC's. The experts say that we could cut down on the spread of contamination if we just washed our hands. I saw an ultra-violet demonstration once that showed all of the germs on our hands and how many we miss when we wash. Even in the grossest of bathrooms, soap and water will kill most of what might infect us. Really, it's such a small thing that will help us to stay healthy.

Emotions can be like germs—they just happen, whether we like it or not. People's words, actions, and sometimes just "them being them" can get under our skin. Perhaps if we just took 15 seconds to wash their contamination out of our head, we could stop the spread of anger or annoyance. Instead of the singing the ABC's, perhaps we should find things to praise about them, or about ourselves. Maybe a hum, a short self-affirmation with the suds. Acceptance, a thick skin, and a little soap will help clear up most anything. Even if we don't always see it working, praying for healing and forgiveness is cleansing.

I like to wash looking up, to face whatever life hands me clean and fresh. Now if only I could get the paper towel thingie to work...

No miracles required

Of course you can just talk to them, but it's not exactly legal or at the very least, you won't get paid. Twenty years of learning and 25 years of experience: it doesn't matter a millisecond. Prove it, the insurance companies say—and yes, we are going to check. Validate it, re-validate it and, validate it again. Without all of that, I might end up saying the wrong thing as a therapist and blow up that mind-reading myth of perfection. My "special powers," like miracles for sainthood, need to be verified. It wouldn't be so bad if it just had to happen once, but last I checked, it was in process with seven or ten different places. One place said they can't even send an application for a few months, there are that many other people in front of me that want to be validated. It's all about having the right credentials.

But credentials and validation are two different things. Credentials tell the world that you should be able to help; validation says that you can and do. Really, it doesn't matter a bit if people think you can do it; it only matters if you can. Although I have helped hundreds of patients, the only thing that is important now to help is the next one.

Seeking help doesn't necessarily mean a paid hour in a therapist's office. Help can come from strangers, friends, and family. We can get help from introspection, affirmations, and prayer. But it does require action. You have to do something more, less, better, or different. Although it doesn't help me earn a living, it helps you live your life. It's not about knowing the art of psychology: it's about knowing the heart of yourself. We all have the ability to validate ourselves. It doesn't take a miracle but won't happen if you don't apply. Check your credentials, you've already proven it. If this helped, please send your check to...

Unsettled

It was as large as the one that ate Cleveland, or so it seemed. How the heck I missed it every week is bit perplexing. It's so light and fluffy that perhaps it just drifted in on the breeze. But now the dust ball was trapped in a nice, safe space. As I moved the bed it whooshed out at me, almost joyful to be free. At first I was a bit startled—it was a little scary. One monster of a spider, I initially thought. But as it drifted back down, it was clear that it wasn't a threat. Just a dust ball that had been collecting strength under the bed. In a moment, it succumbed to my fire-breathing vacuum.

Waiting for the movers I think about the many times I have moved: 8 times, not counting all of my two-month adventures here and there. Packing and unpacking seems to be a way of life for me. I can't imagine the size of the dust-bunnies under the beds of people who have stayed in one place their entire life. They must be epic.

But dust is a prime example of the futility of life. Composed of all kind of things that we don't want to know, it settles on our heart, hiding our beautiful things. And just when you think you have everything clean, a new layer of dust begins to settle.

Transitions in life are hard, but critical to fulfillment. The dust-bunnies in your mind will have their way, whether you like it or not. Oftentimes we let them live in the dark, grow, and become scary. But dark corners are only dark until we let the light and fresh air in. They are only scary for a few moments before we figure it out. And then in an instant, we can move on. Feels like where I need to be, not in Cleveland waiting for the attack. It's time for a change— watch my dust...

Not always right

I know I just saw that building before... but when? Was it 5 minutes ago or a few days ago? I am not really lost but I don't know how to get there from here. I mean, I know where it is, it is right over there—I can almost see it. How did I get so turned around? I think I'm going in circles. If I just make a right, I think I can get back to where I want to go. Let's see where this goes... nope, that didn't work. It's so confusing. I wish I had a map although I am not sure it will show me the way to get to this place. Last time I went there I don't know how I did it—it just worked. I came from over there, I think. It shouldn't be this hard to get to the store. Maybe if I go down the road a bit, I can come at it from a different direction. Breathe.

Although we want to always be right, sometimes we aren't and things get turned around. And that can be pretty easy to do. Life's roads can be confusing. They are always adding new entrances, exits and barriers. Although it may make sense to the civil engineers and designers, the rest of us just get lost. We have to go forward to go backwards, go left when we want to go right, and God forbid, turn around. Like those silly Michigan lefts or NJ jug-handles, they don't seem to make sense and can be confusing.

The good news is that as long as you can keep it in your sight, you really aren't that far away. Eventually you will find the right way, and maybe even a better way. But until you explore all of the roads you may not know which one is best. When I am going someplace new, I always allow extra "stupid-time" for my mistakes. But if you don't try, you will definitely never get there. We may not understand the grand design of

our creator, but if we keep driving, we will eventually get to where we need to go.

Check your gas gauge, keep your wits about you, and remember to breathe and smile. You'll find your way.

Swirl

There is nothing better than a sensuous hot shower in the morning. Feeling the water washing all of the past 24 hours of grime away is cleansing. It is all supposed to drain happily away. But today, it wasn't. Standing in an inch of grimy, soapy water, I swoosh the cover with my toe. A little hairy, but not enough to block the drain. The plunger is just a reach away and I start plunging. Sopping wet, naked, I am just splashing away like a toddler in a kiddie pool. It's hard to tell if I cleared it, but I sure had fun trying. We'll know tomorrow. But still, ankle-deep in it is a bit annoying.

Everyday living produces gunk. We worry, sweat, and generally get dirty. Usually it is easy to wash away the emotional grime. We try to cleanse with whatever refreshes us—from prayer, yoga, music, aerobics, or a simple shower. Most days we are pretty successful. Except when we are not and it backs up a bit. We find ourselves naked and ankle-deep in grime.

When life backs up on us we need to take action. Even if it's a little hairy, we still have choices. We can put on swim fins, call someone, or plunge on in. Fins are silly and plumbers are expensive. Although I recommend a professional when things are really bad, most of the time some goal-directed activity will clear the challenges.

So plunge on in and have a bit of fun with it. Even if you can't clear it, you get to playfully splish-splash around. Go ahead, get a little wet—it won't hurt you. You never know what will produce that happy swirl.

... and away go troubles down the drain.

More happy

She was obviously annoyed: tapping her foot, fidgeting, and looking nervous. Uncomfortable in her own skin, she kept looking down the hall willing her clinician to come down to get her. I couldn't tell if she was excited to see her or had something urgent to talk about. As I watched, the clinician emerged from her office and the woman said an audible "Hallelujah!" I am not sure if she was saved, happy, or ticked off. Maybe all of the above?

The English language has many words of exclamation. Hooray! Huzzah! Wow! Yay! and dozens of others. If you listen, you will hear all kinds of variations. Of course there are sad exclamations as well—Damn, Sigh, Boo... and most every $ % #@ word you can think of. We hear more of the complaining words than the happy ones. It seems we never tire of telling people we are excited or sad about something.

Lots of stuff happens in our world each day that doesn't cause us to exclaim anything. When things are going well, you don't hear people say hooray. It's only when it's exceptional, and even then there is a lot of silence. We hear way more damns and expletives. Not much balance.

We always want people to know that we are sad, angry, or annoyed. Perhaps it's a play for empathy or sympathy, or it's our way of cleansing negative. We want them to feel our pain. But why do we not want them to feel our joy? It seems to me that way more things go right every day than wrong. We often forget to be grateful for even the simple things but are quick to complain about the slightest annoyance. We focus on the negative rather than the positive.

So today I am going to say Yay every time I am grateful. The list is long so I anticipate that people will think I am weird. I could probably cuss like a sailor and people would just shrug. But being grateful and positive is way more Yay than the damning...

If you change your boo-hoos to yippees, you'll be much happier. Hip-hip hooray for more happy!

No crystal ball required

Dorothy got lucky although she didn't know it at the time. It was just a glimpse—and it really wasn't even the future. But the witch's crystal ball was looking somewhere where she was not. In a moment, she saw where it was she wanted to be and felt anxious and sad. Until the witch came and shattered the image, and scared her even more. I wonder why the humbug wizard wouldn't have asked Dorothy for the crystal ball and not a burned-up old broom?

It seems we all want one but in spite of my training, intuition and wishes, I don't have a crystal ball. There are things that I can predict with relative certainty. Good and bad things will happen; we will get what we want sometimes; and other times, not so much. Without the basics of food, water, and shelter we won't survive. Without love, we won't thrive. The sun will come up, the earth will keep spinning, and the IRS will always find me. Other than that, most of it is still subject to whim, folly, or chance. Perhaps that's why he wanted the broom, to clean up the inevitable mess.

Science does teach us something that even a girl from Kansas knew. An object at rest stays at rest—if we do nothing, nothing will probably happen. Dorothy had to skip down the road to her adventure, even though she was probably pretty scared. An object in motion tends to stay in motion—it may not always be the most direct path, but not following the swirly gold bricks will just leave you with a busted up old house and some strange, little-minded people. The only path we can take is the one right in front of us. Maybe Newton should have been in Baum's classic.

Really, I don't want a crystal ball. It would probably be more scary than

comforting—it didn't do anything for Dorothy. And I'd rather not know what happens if I don't change. So change I will. Resilient and unafraid I will face what may come, from flying monkeys to wickedness. No wizard with empty gifts can help if we don't take control of our future. All I can do is follow the yellow brick road, find some good friends to have adventures with, and remember there is no place like home.

Some red slippers and a little dog to chew on them would be cool though...

A Good Tip

It doesn't seem to matter how good or bad the service is, at least in this country. In Europe, it is a bit different. They just round up the bill and add a few, regardless of the total. I am forever trying to calculate tips. I usually end up with close enough or a little more. Although we like to think that it's a reward, it really isn't—at least not to the server. What started as an incentive is now critical to their livelihood. With a five-dollar difference an hour, I can't even imagine making a living on straight wages that service personnel make. It sure helps the employer though as we end up paying their payroll. And of course our generosity helps some servers to far exceed the minimum wage. I talked to a bartender in a mountain resort who astounded me with his earnings. But most of us don't begrudge gratuities. It's our way of alleviating the guilt for letting someone serve us.

If you think about gratitude, it is kind of a peculiar thing. We are supposed to be grateful for all we have, for all our gifts. But for many people, our prayers consist of what is still on our wish list. For things to get better, for the suck to go away. Most of us do pray more for others than ourselves; at least, I think we do. But do we pray for those we don't know? Not usually. But there is so much around us to be grateful for, even if it is mundane and average.

We should spend more time being grateful in the here and now. Pay for what makes us happy with a smile, a thank you or a wave. If we go beyond manners, what would that look like? More than kindness to strangers, but truly helping those that need it. To help the seekers find, the hurt to heal, and the tearful to find joy. Perhaps we should spend a large percentage of our day doing just that.

So today, I am going to try to be grateful fifteen to twenty percent of the time. In my 16-hour vertical day, that equates to about three and a quarter hours. And if I can't, I'll try and remember how difficult it is to make a living without being grateful.

What a great tip!

Just another hill

It was perfect! I had dusted off the bike a few days back and rode about 8 miles down the shoulder of a treacherous highway. Although adrenalin is good, the kind produced by tractor-trailers a few inches away not so much. But this road was perfect. A few steps from my house, following the Great Bay, I drove it in the car to see how far it was: about 7.5 miles—15miles round trip. Maybe an hour and a half ride. I saw lots of cool vistas and scenery as I sped down the road in my car. I could hardly wait to get on my bike. Canopied shade, gentle hills, and smooth quiet road. I was going to enjoy this. Water bottle in hand, I grabbed my bike to set off for an adventure.

At first, it was amazing. Nice and shady, easy roads that were just the right amount of up and down. Straight as an arrow, I powerfully pedaled. Wait, where did that hill come from? Powering through it in the car, it was invisible. No matter, a little work and I made it. Can't wait for the next bend! Another hill, even steeper. Huff and puff, a bit of side-to-side and it was crested. Not much downhill, I thought. As the road twisted and turned, it seemed way more uphill than down. How long is this blasted thing anyway? Rubbery legs cussed at the next hill. I am never going to make that one, I thought. I should stop, but I don't want a lousy time. The way back was going to be amazing: it has to be all downhill!

Of course it wasn't all downhill. It seemed that there were just as many ups as there were downs. How did I miss all this coasting on the way here? Huff, puff, huff, puff. Wait, could it be? One more, no wait, two more... Made it! I wanted to raise my arms in victory like I just finished the Tour de France!

When we try to imagine our life journeys they seem pretty predictable.

School, graduate, job, married, family, kids, retirement... Seems pretty smooth. Of course we know that there will be twists and hills, but nothing we can't handle. We imagine the path to be beautiful and fulfilling. Scenic byways, shady stops, and lots of downhill after our accomplishments.

Until we are staring up at yet another hill. The straight path becomes impossible as we go side-to-side, standing up and pedaling with all our might. And around each bend, it seems there is always another steeper hill to climb. Never seems to be as much time to coast as we want. This thing called life is work.

The path is still pretty and tranquil if you look around. Powering through it in your car, it's hard to see both the beauty and hardship that awaits. The more you pedal, the stronger you get. When I look back, most of the hard stuff has long faded. But the sense of accomplishment remains. Made it so far! I am sure in a few weeks I'll be smiling at its ease.

Until then I'll just keep riding along. Always forward, never back. Although the next hill might be steeper than the last, at some point I'll get to coast. And if it gets too hard, I'll just take a quick break and admire the beauty for a while. It really isn't a race anyway.

Somewhere around here

It was important; I need to remember it! Well, that was my thought then anyway. I knew if I didn't write it down it would be lost. I meant to write it down... maybe I did? But that was eons and weeks ago. So the question becomes, do I search for the paper that might not exist, or try to search some other way to try find it. How could I be so dumb? But really I don't think I am all that dumb. I dun got me a few of dem fancy coledge deeplomers. It's just that every time I learn something new, it pushes some old stuff out of my brain.

We all forget stuff, important and not. We usually don't forget the really important stuff but anything below that is fair game. Birthdays, phone calls, where our car keys are and even where we parked. Some days I think I forget more than I remember. I had a full schedule of new appointments yesterday and by the last one, I had to check my notes to make sure I didn't forget his name.

But as annoying as forgetting things is, and it *is* maddening sometimes, I am grateful for forgetting. I really don't want to remember a whole bunch of stuff. We all have lots of big insults and injuries in our past that we try hard to forget. And most days we can... or at least, ignore them. But there dun be a bazgillion other things that didn't go quite right that we thankfully forget.

So every time I forget something, I think well, there is something that didn't fit. An idea whose time has passed or hasn't come yet. If it wasn't important enough to remember, than it must not be important. If I stop and try, take a breath, a solution will come. The keys are here, the call will get made, and

things will move on. Why worry about what we forget? Just let it be forgotten. If it's important, it will stick around. And the rest, dun let it be done.

Now where was I going with all of this?

In and out

It's highly contagious. I sat watching as one after another succumbed to its influence. If you just watch where people gather, either early in the morning or late at night, it's apparent. I am pretty sure humans are the only ones that suffer from it. It's odd though, laughter can be the same catalyst. If you are in a room full of laughing people, you will certainly smile, if not laugh. It's why there are warm-up acts for comedians. But yawning is a different experience. Although I wish joy for everyone, I also wish that they got more sleep.

Physiologically, we yawn to expel stale old air and fill our lungs with invigorating oxygen. When we are tired or bored our bodies crave the refresh. But when we yawn, others yawn with us. Could it be they are as tired or as bored as we are? Hard to believe we are all experiencing the same thing at once.

Breathing is something we do every day without thinking... it's required actually. But we all breathe differently. When we are full of exertion, we huff and puff producing big clouds on cold days. Then when we sit by the stream on a lazy summer morn, our breath is drowned out by even the faintest hummingbird.

If we can figure out how to breathe with intention, we can help control our emotions. Force the shallow to become deep or oxygenize our depression. I know that the repetitiveness of a simple mantra can help cleanse. One of my favorites is with each breath we breathe in love and exhale worry. If you can keep you mind on such a simple process, you will be able to breathe better.

Now, if only that was contagious.

Down is good

It's not like they teach you this in school, unless perhaps you got to Martha Stewart's. I checked her website and sure enough there were lessons on fluffing, or re-fluffing comforters. In fact a quick Google search produced hundreds of hits. Apparently it is quite common for the nice fluffy down in your comforter to lose its fluff. So I tried.... After washing it, it just came out nice and clean but lots of lumps. I shook it, massaged it, and even threatened it without much success. I held it up to the light and there are big spots without anything at all and huge clumps in others. My knees will sweat and my bellybutton will shiver. That will never do.

We seem to have a love/hate relationship with fluff. We use the word derisively when describing people or ideas, but like the marshmallow kind and warmth on beds and pillows. But I guess the older we get, the lumpier we are. I think my waistline is way too lumpy from eating too much fluff. Maybe I need to climb into the dryer and get my fluff redistributed? Or maybe the treadmill will help my fluff. Maybe I should chase some geese around the golf course and get some new fluff? Here geesey geesy...

We all get down and lumpy. The solution is to get the right amount of fluff and make sure it's distributed well. Too much of a good thing is, well, still too much. If we were all full of down, we'd be depressed and too hot. But a little down helps us appreciate happiness. If we were always happy, we might never be able to learn from sad. But without any fluff, we are pretty flat and boring.

So we have to take time for fluff in our lives. Meaningless, pointless things perhaps, but they bring our hearts joy. From the secret indulgences to

daydreams, it is important to take time for the unimportant. It's what helps us refresh and focus on the other lumpy stuff we have to deal with.

A little indulgence never hurt anyone. Shake it out, tumble it around and have some fun now and then. It will change your attitude. You won't be able to comfort anyone unless you are well-balanced.

Fluff it up.

By the numbers

I've only missed two days I think, both because I didn't have Internet access. I did repost the most popular post once. But other than that, I have written over 600 blogs since February 17, 2012. Near 60,000 reads from 68 countries and 47 states. But it continues to amaze and humble me that people find personal meaning in my writings. Lessons learned and shared, both weaknesses and strengths laid bare for the world to see. From adventures in casino bathrooms to PTSD, we have explored life, faith, love and friendship. And still, I continue to find inspiration and insight into the world, and myself, every single day.

As a therapist, I help people to think about things differently. Through the power of words, and the emotions expressed, we travel together to gain understanding of life events. Character exploration, happiness, pain, and the whole gamut in between. Although I have worked with people with very serious mental illness, the overwhelming majority of people just need to re-center their thoughts and act upon lessons learned. The power of positive, of living in the moment with neither fear nor expectation, helps us to experience the world around us as friendly.

People create their own barriers to fulfillment. They forge chains that bind them to the past or unicorn dreams of an idealized future. They spend their days running from, or to, things that they fear or desire. But without pausing to look at themselves, the race is a mere pointless hamster wheel that does nothing more than exhaust your energy. It's not about how fast, far or how much, but the quality of each moment in time.

Insight into yourself doesn't need to come from hours of deep, reflective

thought. Although some of our challenges are buried in the way back, many of our solutions aren't. We cannot change even a moment of our past. Although our futures are uncertain, we have the power to change the here and now every single second. Guided by faith, love and compassion, we can always find the right path.

My journey into myself continues. Thanks for walking with me and looking briefly through my lens. I hope that some of my insights have led to some of your own. Together, we have the ability to change ourselves, and the world.

The light in me recognizes the same divine spark in you. Let your light shine the way to fulfillment.

Namaste.